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With a Labour Company in France

BEING THE WAR DIARY
OF THE
58TH LABOUR COMPANY.

CAPT. T. C. THOMAS,
O.B.E., M.C.

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Preface.

Most of my readers will remember the historical novel which commences "I am but a plain yeoman and more used to wielding a sword than a pen!" To my critics I would say, "I am but a plain Labour Officer and more used to wielding a pick and shovel."

Of the making of war-books there is no end, and I do not wish this to be mistaken for one. It is but a plain record, written as a souvenir for the members of a company for whom I have the greatest admiration and respect, with the hope that it will bring back to their memory the days we spent together, when time will have effaced all recollection of the bad days we had and we remember only the good.

T. C. THOMAS, Capt., O.B.E., M.C.,
Commanding 58th Labour Company.

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With a Labour Company in France.

CHAPTER I.

Bray, Kemmel, and La Clytte, May—June, 1916.

It was in March, 1916, that the War Office first sanctioned the raising of Labour Battalions for service abroad and at home, and May of that year saw the birth at Chadderton of the 19th Labour Battalion of the Cheshire Regiment. The men were drawn from all units in the Western Command, and included cotton spinners and factory hands from the Midlands, farmers from the country towns, and miners from South Wales. For two short weeks we were trained during every moment that could be spared from inoculation, vaccination, etc.; and the seemingly interminable process of fitting out for service overseas, until we were able to at least present an appearance of a battalion on parade.

But the training came to an end all too soon. On Thursday, May 25th, we received our marching orders, and on Friday, the 26th, at 8-30 p.m., we marched out accompanied by a huge and enthusiastic crowd, who followed us to the station, and were with difficulty kept from entraining with us.

Southampton was reached at 9 a.m. Saturday morning, and all day long we waited for orders to embark. These came in the evening, and by 8 p.m. we were all aboard. Then arose our first difficulty. Arms and ammunition were issued and guards were required on all places of importance on board. Few of our men had ever handled a rifle in their lives, and it was with the greatest difficulty that some were found who professed knowledge; but I tremble to think what would have happened if they had been called upon to use their arms. To one unaccustomed to the sea it was weird and impressive; the huge ships, for we were one of a convoy steaming majestically along through the darkness of the night, packed with their human freight, setting out on their great adventure to meet they knew not what, with not a sign of a light showing. Luckily the night was fine, the sea perfectly calm, and the journey uneventful, though in censoring the letters a day or two afterwards I came across one, written, I fancy, while still suffering from an overdose of Chadderton hospitality, giving a vivid account of an attack by enemy submarines, repulsed by our aircraft and a flotilla of T.B.D.'s.

We landed at Havre at 8 a.m. on Sunday, the 28th; marched through the town, up the hill to the Rest Camp. It was a toilsome task after our journeying with a full pack, but not a man fell out.

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The following is the list of the Officers who landed with the Battalion :—

Colonel J. J. O. Sullivan, in Command.

Capt. and Adjt. W. E. Price.	Capt. F. R. Wilson, R.A.M.C.
"A" Coy. Capt. G. Dean.	Lieut. A. L. Boughey.
"B" Coy. Capt. Edwards.	Lieut. Callaghan.
"C" Coy. Capt. T. C. Thomas.	Lieut. G. Tudor.
"D" Coy. Capt. T. Taylor.	Lieut. W. C. Woolcock.

Lieut. and Q.-Mas. J. W. Ransome.

We confidently expected to stay here a fortnight or so to get into working order, but the powers that be thought otherwise, and on the very next day came peremptory orders for two companies to march out at 11 p.m. and entrain for an unknown destination. The Companies detailed were "A" and "C," who thus, right from the start of their career, were associated together until finally united as the 58th Labour Company. Down the hill again we marched, throught the dark, deserted streets of the town to the station, where we were introduced to the Active Service troop train. The carriages were ordinary goods vans, all alike, having the well-known continental sign "Chevaux 8, Hommes 40," and used for conveying men, horses or stores as required.

Personally I was lucky, as Officer Commanding troops and train, I had what had been once a luxurious first class compartment, now sadly dirtied, torn and bedraggled from the rough usage of thousands of others who had travelled to the front before us. Of all the difficult jobs, that of entraining by night seemed the worst; the horses, new to the process, flatly refused to mount the inclined platforms into the trucks, the wagons, handled with difficulty by men for the first time, refused to go in the way they should, and the men themselves packed thirty and forty in a truck had not yet acquired that resignation to the inevitable that only comes by frequent moves on Continental lines in war time.

At last all were loaded. I received a sheaf of papers, and after several solos on toy trumpets by numerous guards and porters, away we went, with much bumping and jolting at the terrific (?) speed of about eight miles an hour. We left at 3 a.m., and travelled serenely along through miles of country decked in the beauty of spring, and, by way of contrast, the line itself flanked on either side by that inevitable sign of the voyage of the British Army—empty bully beef tins ! ! ! All day and all night we sauntered on, arriving ultimately at Heilly, at 4 p.m. on the following day, after a journey of thirty-seven hours. Here again our rawness was evident, few of the men had any knowledge of how to pitch a tent, and some weird struggles ensued; to add to the jest, as soon as all tents were pitched down they had to come again to be camouflaged. No materials were provided for this, so liquid mud was daubed all over with startling effect. Here we saw our first battle plane, one of ours sailing serenely along. Of course it was taken for a Hun by several, who at once carried out the drill book movement of lying flat on the ground and burying one's nose in the mud.

On the morning of June 1st, I reported to Corps Headquarters, and was sent on to see the Brigadier-General at Ville, for whom we were to work. I introduced myself and my errand, and had to undergo a close inspection, as labour men were an unknown quantity in those days. Finally I was shown

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a bundle of blue prints and drawings of gun pits, ammunition shelters, etc., with the remark, "I suppose, being a non-technical unit, you understand nothing about these?" My reply that I had over twenty years' experience of such work elicited the following, "Good Heavens, then you are the first man I've met yet in the army who is in his right place! How did you get there?" I replied, "I volunteered for it," at which the General shook his head and said, "I knew it must have been something like that." After that we progressed rapidly, and finally he sent me back to camp in state, in his staff car, with orders to move to Bray that night. "Lorries would report at our camp at 4 p.m. if possible to convey us, but the move must be carried out." At 4 p.m. one lorry arrived, the only one, for tents, etc.; so making the best of a bad job, we strapped on our packs and started on our first route march. I do not think any of us will forget that twelve mile march. The men had had no training in marching, were unused to carrying packs, had been travelling practically continuously for six days, and at the best were unfits. Still they pluckily held on, and mile after mile was covered, as we marched further and further into the salient. Darkness had now set in, and in honour perhaps of our arrival, there was a huge strafe on, and we were treated to a great display of fireworks. All around us was a huge ring of fire, and, except immediately in our rear, we could see the flashes and hear the reports of guns of all calibres.

I am afraid the beauty of it all did not appeal to us; it was to almost everyone of us our first experience of war, and it seemed, too, as if we were marching not only into a salient, but right through and out the other side. To add to our cup, when we reached the Etinhem Cross Roads, we were ordered to open out to intervals of one hundred yards between platoons, as the road in front was being shelled!! Last of all our troubles, I found that the Adjutant and R.S.M., whom I had sent on to select a camp site, had been placed under arrest by a zealous R.F.A. Officer, who was unaware that there was such a Battalion as the 19th Cheshires in existence, let alone at the Front, and had 'phoned to Town Majors, Camp Commandants, A.P.M.'s, etc., until at last somebody at Corps H.Q. remembered us and explained.

Of course, no site was ready, so we drew into a likely looking field and parked the transport, served out some kind of rations, and proceeded to bivouac for the night. I had just turned in when the sergeant of the guard reported that some R.E.'s camped near had informed him that the field we were in was shelled regularly every morning at 3 a.m.!!! The last thing I remember doing was, with the assistance of the Adjutant, and two electric torches, searching the ground for shell holes. Finding none, I turned in and fell asleep immediately. Nothing happened that night, except that one N.C.O. awakened from his dreams by the rattle of a caterpillar hauling a big gun on the hard road, and thinking the camp was being shelled, dived into the nearest ditch and landed up to his neck in dirty water.

We moved camp to Grovetown next morning, and while peacefully pitching our tents we were startled by the whine of a shell passing over us, immediately followed by three others. Luckily they pitched well clear of us, and threw up a huge pillar of smoke and debris, while a few pieces of metal reached our camp, to our great alarm. But familiarity again bred contempt, and two days after the detachment turned out in force to witness a game of

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"soccer" between their chosen and a team of R.F.A., paying not the slightest attention to the shells that flew over during the game.

We remained at Bray and Meaulte for three weeks, digging gun-pits and ammunition shelters, constructing dugouts, etc.; all within 3,000 yards of the line, although we had neither shell helmets or gas masks, and it was at the very same time stated in the House of Commons that no Labour Battalion worked within twenty miles of the line.

But what annoyed the men more than all was being referred to as Conscientious Objectors (one Battalion we met pathetically asked if we fought with bananas). At Meaulte one private showed his willingness to fight by fairly knocking out a gunner who contemptuously referred to him as a "Conchie"; a gallant deed for which he was first arrested by the M.P. and then liberated and complimented by our sporting Colonel.

From the brow of the hill immediately in front of where we were working, we could see the front line trenches over against Fricourt and Mametz, the identical spot which was afterwards visited by the King and christened "King George's Hill." Owing to our forward positions we were constantly shelled and every day the men would return to camp with tales, which lost nothing in the telling, of hairbreadth escapes. Luckily, we had no casualties and the men got used to the daily excitement of dodging Fritz, but complained more, and with good reason, of the nights. Every evening, as soon as darkness settled down over the country, batteries would burst forth from positions unknown and unseen in daylight, and continue firing until daybreak. Our particular bugbears were a battery of 8-inch howitzers in front of us and a 12-inch immediately behind us; when these got really going, they took the part of big drum in the orchestra, while the lesser guns played the kettledrum part, all combining in a din which fairly made the ground quiver. Added to these and indistinguishable in the general turmoil were Fritz's shells, from his counter battery work, bursting all around. No wonder we all found sleep at night a difficult proposition.

The coming push was now the prevailing topic and to make room for the fighting troops we were withdrawn from the Somme front. At 10 a.m. on June 19th we marched out, retracing our steps to our railhead at Heilly. Here we again entrained in our old friends the goods vans, and after several heated discussions with the R.T.O., re the late arrival of our transport, we started off at 3 p.m., picking up our other two companies en route.

Of this journey I have only the vaguest recollections. I was again O.C. train, the Colonel having wisely elected to proceed by motor, and I dimly remember being awakened at countless stations, and asked to produce my "Movement Orders." Exactly what the object was I do not know, no one troubled to check the numbers, and I found ultimately that I had conveyed 1,000 men and transport, right across France, with a Movement Order for only 500.

We reached Baileull at 5 a.m. on the 20th, and marched up the hill through the town and over the frontier, "A" and "C" Companies to La Clytte and "B" and "D" to Dranoutre and Neuve Eglise. Here we were set to work repairing the roads over Kemmel Hill, in the neighbourhood of Hallebast (Hellblast in the Army) and Dickebush, and also building a new avoiding road through La Clytte.

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On the latter I had a rather interesting experience. Part of the road ran between two rows of trees and looking between the tree trunks we could plainly see the Bosche trenches on the Wyschaete Ridge opposite. One day a Brigadier wandered past, stopped to enquire what we were doing, showed me the trenches, but remarked that we were quite safe as the Bosche never shelled small working parties even if he "could see us, which was doubtful." We were much relieved until an hour or so later came another Brass Hat. He stopped and glared, then called for the Officer-in-Charge. I presented myself and was greeted with "Do you know, Sir, that your men are working under direct observation of the Hun, and may get blown to H—— any minute. You must stop work instantly until this road is screened." He then gave me an order to get wire and canvas from a dump for the latter. This had only just arrived when up came No. 3. His first question was, "What's that canvas for?" I explained, and, with a shrug of his shoulders, he replied, "Well, you can put it up if you like, but if you do, as soon as Fritz sees it he'll surely shell it, he always treats new road screens that way." What was a poor Officer to do? Obviously, only one thing, carry on as originally intended and chance it. We did so and nothing happened.

In order to join up our new road with the existing one, we had to cut through one of the high thorn hedges peculiar to that part of the country, which lay parallel to and in full view of the Bosche line. Making a thirty-feet opening here was likely to attract unpleasant attentions, as Fritz strongly objects to any alteration of the landscape. But one morning there was a thick fog. I immediately detailed a party to uproot the hedge and another to dig a suitable trench the other side of the road. The whole hedge was then dragged across and planted securely again, and when the mist cleared, it was quite impossible to detect the alteration from the enemy side.

From our camp we could see the towers and roofs of Ypres quite distinctly, and in the evenings we used to take our field glasses and watch the Hun pounding away at that unfortunate town, until the pall of smoke would blot all out from our vision. One day we essayed to go sightseeing there and managed to work our way in, but no sooner had we reached the "Grande Place," than shells began crashing in the houses on either side, and deeming discretion the better part, we turned the car and bolted.

We spent a very pleasant four weeks here, varying the monotony with a series of cricket matches against all and sundry. On the 16th of July we visited Neuve Eglise and played a memorable match with "D" Company. The latter hearing of our great (?) reputation, had scoured the countryside and placed in the field a team which included at least eight strangers to the Battalion. The tale of how our team rose to the occasion and chiefly by aid of the sensational bowling of Sergt. Ellis, who took eight wickets for twelve runs, we snatched a victory by one wicket, is still cherished among the sporting records of the Company. On our return journey we passed through Bailleul, and Lieut. Tudor and I dined at the far-famed Faucon Hotel. We had such an enjoyable evening that we there and then decided we would cycle over again as soon as our duties permitted. But once again the fates proved unkind, for on our return to camp, we found orders to move once more awaiting us.

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Pte. W. Riding, D.C.M.

Lieut. G. Tudor.

Sergt. A. E. Ward, M M

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CHAPTER II.

The Somme, Albert to High Wood.

July, 1916—January, 1917.

Reports had reached us of the great advance on the Somme, and rumour was busy with tales of expected advances all along the line. We little thought when we marched through Bailleul on July 17th, that the next time we should be passing through, the town would be desolate and in ruins. We left the station full of excitement, as we were going south to follow up the great advance. Our railhead once more was Heilly, which we reached at 6 a.m. on the morning of the 18th. Rain was falling and the roads were in a fearful state when we marched to Meaulte, and failing other accommodation bivouacked for the night.

The following day we moved into billets, and the next commenced work on the standard gauge railway. With the approval of our C.O., I arranged to do all the earthworks on the track "piece-work," so many cubic yards per man per day. The companies working on the grade were divided into squads of one N.C.O. and eleven men, and each squad had its task marked out first. By far the larger percentage of the men had never handled picks and shovels before, but as they were entitled to knock off as soon as their task was finished, it was not long before they had learnt the art of muck throwing.

Of course, there were several "Weary Willies" and "Tired Tims" and to cope with these a special section was made up daily of all work-shy men, who were given, if possible, the hardest ground to tackle and kept out till they had finished. This gang was known to fame as the "Black Gang," and, being under control of my senior N.C.O., the title developed into "Sergeant Johnson's Black Hand Gang." A few days with this section, with the inevitable "chipping" from the rest, usually resulted in a cure. It was very seldom found necessary to crime any man, but on one occasion it had to be done. Pte. C—— was brought before me, and just to show him what he was up against in the Army, I entered his crimes in full and a little over, and read them out, with the punishments that could be given. The list was as follows:

When on Active Service.	Refusing to assist in making a military work in the field. Maximum sentence:—14 years' P.S.
	Insolence to his superior officer. Maximum sentence:—14 years' P.S.
	Disobeying the lawful command of his N.C.O. Maximum sentence:—Death.
	Disobeying the lawful command of his Officer. Maximum sentence:—Death.

As the sentences were enumerated the unhappy man seemed to shrink smaller and smaller, and when I remanded him till the following day to think it over, he literally staggered out, expecting to be shot at dawn! Next day

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he arrived very subdued, and after lecturing him on the folly of trying to kick against authority, I dismissed him with a caution. It had its effect, he never came before me again.

Our line lay on what is now historic ground. We were working directly in rear of the first big push our armies had made since trench warfare had begun. Our starting point was not far from Albert, where we had our first revelation of the effects of modern gunfire in the remains of the famous church and buildings adjoining. While I was still there the concussion of shells exploding near caused fragments of stone and glass to fall in the interior of the former. Then our line ran past Becordel and Becourt through our second line trenches to Fricourt. Here we worked for some days cutting through the ruins of what was once a delightful little village. Near the station we had our one find of treasure trove. We were clearing what I believe was the ruins of the Station Estaminet, and in one recess in the cellar we dug up a bottle of red wine. The remainder of the excavation was finished at the double, the men fairly jumped to it, the result being twenty odd bottles of red wine, two of port, and four of gin. The last of these I shared with the other officers and divided the first among the lucky finders.

The following day, about half a mile further on, someone discovered alongside his excavations several wooden cases. Rembering the previous day's find, he covered them up until the dinner hour, when he and his friends in feverish haste dug out what all believed to be cases of whiskey. Amid great excitement these were brought to the surface and forced open, only to find them full, not of bottles, by German bombs ! ! !

Immediately alongside the line was a battery of 8in. howitzers manned by Australians, who worked the guns stripped to the waist, and whose picture appeared in nearly all the illustrated papers of that period. We used to stand directly in rear, and watch the shells, like huge cricket balls, travelling away through the air.

We spent all our leisure time exploring the dugouts cut in the solid chalk, thirty and forty feet below the ground. In the south of the village there was an underground hospital capable of holding some fifty patients. This had a wide stair down to a landing about twenty feet below the surface, where, on either side were rooms fitted up with hot and cold water baths and electric lights, and partitions covered with wall paper ! ! ! Then, down again another twenty feet by a similar wide stair were large wards fitted up with beds all round, the whole being connected to the centre of the village by an underground passage several hundred feet long. In one deep dugout one of the men discovered three dead Bosche sitting side by side on a rough form with their backs against the wall. The middle one had on one of those greatly-coveted souvenirs, a Bosche helmet ; this he promptly seized and pulled away when the whole three toppled forward right on top of him, giving him the fright of his life. He bolted, and it was some time afterwards before he had sufficiently recovered to return for his booty.

Right opposite the village lay the hill where on the top the trenches were so close together that one could throw bombs across, and which a fortnight afterwards was visited by the King and christened " King George's Hill." For some weeks after, on the same day of the week and the same hour, the

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Bosche planted a shell on this very spot, as if expecting the King to be a weekly visitor. We explored these thoroughly, though it was extremely difficult to even guess where the German lines had been, they were so obliterated by the shelling of our guns. All that could be seen were short patches here and there of what once had been trenches. Here he had had an excellent communication trench in " Hidden Wood," set deeply in a fissure in the north side of the hill and from which his lesser trenches opened in all directions, like the fingers of one's hand.

By August 19th, we had nearly reached Mametz Wood, and had gone forward to inspect the country ahead, when we almost walked into one of Fritz's barrages. Right over the south-western end of the wood he rained shell after shell, raising clouds of smoke like huge trees, until a dense black curtain relieved by crimson flashes of the bursting shells hid it out of our sight. It was a magnificent scene from a distance. The following Tuesday we had our first experience of an air-raid. Early in the morning fourteen planes came over and dropped bombs on all sides of our camp and billets, but luckily no one in our Company was hurt, though several in the adjoining camp were, and considerable damage done.

For the next two weeks we worked the line forward and also constructed several gun-spurs or short sidings to accommodate guns mounted on specially constructed railway carriages. There were three of these howitzers of 12in. calibre rejoicing in the names of " Jerking Gertie," " Flaming Fanny " and " Belching Bella."

We had now worked as far forward as we could go and were actually in front of most of our heavy batteries and close up to our field guns. It was here we first noted Fritz's propensity for shelling the same spot at the same hour each day. The first day he nearly caught us marching home at 4-30 p.m., four shells flying immediately over us and landing about 400 yards in front right across our pathway. We promptly side-stepped off to the right and avoided the next comers. On the following days we took care to repeat our deviation, and were rewarded by seeing the shells falling harmlessly alongside the line while we marched in safety a few hundreds yards away. Later on, he used to send one single shell to the same spot near the line every day punctually at noon. It was known amongst the men as the " Twelve o'clock gun," and immediately the burst was heard all parties " downed tools " and knocked off for lunch.

On the 28th, we had to beat a hurried retreat, shrapnel falling all around us, rendering the gun-pit too hot a place to work in. We had our first view of some German prisoners on September 15th, when seven hundred were marched past us to the collecting cage near Albert. Several of these had their faces and hands completely blackened, being probably members of a raiding party captured the preceding night. A few days later the first tanks passed through Meaulte ; one became stranded near Mametz and I was able to crawl inside and inspect what was then the greatest novelty of the war.

Then came the most unpleasant part of our task. The line ran through the lower portion of Mametz Wood, obliquely through the Bosche trench, and then right through the parados. As we had to excavate five feet all the way, those who remember the German habit of burying his dead in this particular

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portion of the trench will appreciate the treat we had, for there is no smell in existence like unto dead Bosche ! ! !

Being on the line of communications immediately behind the firing line we had a great opportunity of seeing all the different troops moving up and down. One day the Guards Division, another the Scots with the kilted pipers, still another, the Australians, would pass us, company after company marching up to take their places in the firing line, returning alas ! a few days later with their ranks terribly depleted.

The transport on the roads was a never-failing interest to us all. Mile after mile of wagons of all descriptions, batteries and ammunition columns, convoys of lorries, big guns drawn by eight heavy horses, still larger ones with huge caterpillars. The roads were sometimes blocked for miles, from Meaulte to Mametz, with a dense mass, which the traffic control police struggled hard to reduce to some kind or order. The roads soon showed evidence of the continuous traffic, and ruts, holes and pits abounded everywhere. On one occasion it took us two hours to cover six miles in a Ford car, for every half-mile or so we had to get out and lift the back wheels out of a shell hole ! ! !

After passing through Mametz Wood, we had worked so far from our billets that we were ordered to camp at Bazentin to construct a station yard there, and on October 22nd, we moved out and pitched our tents on the western slope of Bazentin-le-Grand Hill. The ground was so pitted with shell-holes that it was with the greatest difficulty we found enough room, but by spreading the tents well apart we managed. From the hill above us we could see High Wood, the only ridge between us and the front line trenches which were about 5,000 yards away. Immediately north of us were the old Bosche second line trenches, now almost obleitrated by our shell-fire ; on the east side we were bounded by Montaubon road ; on the south by a reserve trench constructed by our men during their attack, with several battery positions in rear ; and on the west by Bazentin Wood. During the whole of our stay here, these objects on all four sides were shelled almost nightly, and night after night I think the whole camp, kept awake by the terrific din of our own guns all around us, used to lie under the canvas listening to the shells screaming overhead and bursting all around us. Apart from one or two small casualties caused by splinters penetrating the tents at night, we were lucky enough to escape, as no shell fell directly in our camp. One man, however, was killed by a lump of frozen earth about the size of a football, thrown about sixty yards by a shell-burst, falling on his head while he slept, and crushing it.

Our work was, as I have said, constructing Bazentin station yard. The position chosen was on both sides of the Bosche trenches in a perfect mass of shell-holes, in addition, right in the centre were the remains of an underground ammunition shelter about twelve feet deep, with the broken pillars and steel girders that had once supported the roof lying interlaced and twisted into fantastic shapes. To fill these and level up to the required grades for the railway line was a formidable task, rendered no less easy by the occasional shelling the site was subjected to.

There is a story told that after the track had been laid and the line opened for traffic, one night a huge shell struck under the front of the Control hut,

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completely demolished one half of it and threw one of the occupants into a shell-hole full of water. His first thought on emerging was " where was his mate." He called again and again, but received no answer. Then, expecting the worst, looked into the half hut still remaining, though shattered, and discovered his mate lying, not dead, but still fast asleep in his bed ! ! !

Right over the station I witnessed the finest air fight I have ever seen. Five " Jerry's " came sailing over one early morning, presumably to bomb the railhead, when suddenly from the blue sky above, twelve of ours swept down on them. Against such odds " Jerry " had no chance, and after some marvellous diving and banking on the part of our airmen, three dropped to the ground in quick succession. The other two tried to bolt, but were pursued. One was already badly winged and forced to land near our line, and if the other managed to crawl back home he was lucky, though we heard that, flying very low, he was brought down by rifle fire from our front line trenches. Certainly we were "top dog " in the air about this time.

Bazentin finished, we moved forward to Longueval Station, situated alongside the Devil's (Delville) Wood. A more desolate scene I have never come across ; the shell-holes filled with mud and water, and the few tree trunks that remained torn and blasted by the torrents of shot and shell that had fallen among them. Our first job was to cut a deep trench all round the site and drain the shell-holes into it. Many and gruesome were the sights revealed when the water was drained off, and we had to keep a burying party busy for days, trying to inter decently the remains, now quite unrecognisable, of the poor fellows who had fallen in the awful fighting for that historic wood. We were extremely lucky here, for a thick November mist enveloped us every day and made enemy observation impossible, except for a very short time, and then only from a low altitude.

On November 27th, high above us we could dimly see a great fight going on. Then, to our dismay, we saw one of our 'planes falling at a terrific pace with shoots of flame issuing from several places. When about 500 feet up, the pilot managed to regain control and we could see him trying to beat the flames out with his gloves. Round and round flew the 'plane, the pilot vainly trying to race away from the flames and find a suitable landing-place. Again, the machine fell out control and we expected it to crash at our feet, but once again the pilot, retaining his nerve marvellously, righted it, and sighting a spot with fewer shell-holes than usual alongside the wood, landed and succeeded in getting away with only slight burns, the 'plane being completely burned.

We completed the yard again without a casualty from shell-fire, though " D " Company lost seven men through striking a Mills' bomb during the excavations, but three days after we left the whole yard was strafed and every line blown up. For days we tried to get in to repair sufficiently to get a train out, but were chased out by shell-fire on each occasion, and it was not until the tenth day we were able to accomplish our object.

December the 4th, saw us commencing the line to Le Sars. We had a near squeak on our way to work. The Battalion had only just passed over the road from our camp to Bazentin-Le-Grand when the road was heavily shelled, killing several Australians and Devons working on the road, and wounding

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many more. A day or two afterwards, while near High Wood, the men had placed their coats, etc., in a nice square on the bank, some 300 yards south of where they were working, and two men were placed in the centre on guard. Suddenly, overhead, we heard the whistle of a shell which burst on the southern corner of the square, scattering mud and coats in all directions. The guards immediately marched stolidly to the spot and commenced re-arranging the coats. "Whizz,' another shell burst on the western corner, and over went the faithful guards to inspect. We watched in fear and trembling, shouting orders to take cover; but to no avail. Bang, came the third on the northern corner and round went the guard, repeating the motion when the fourth had burst on the last corner. As soon as the shelling had finished a corporal was sent across and returned with the message to the effect that "they could not stop the shells, but that the coats had not been really damaged." The C.O., who witnessed the whole affair, was undecided whether to crime the guard for their foolhardiness, or reward them for devotion to duty under shell-fire!!!

A favourite amusement of Fritz was to search the valleys, commencing by dropping a shell at one end and continuing along with others at intervals. Two of our companies were set out along the grade covering nearly a mile of track, when one afternoon just before "blowing-up" time, he started this little game at the north-east end, pitching his first about 400 yards beyond our furthest party. After his thud had dropped, I realised what he was up to, and sent that party in, then as the searching continued, and the shells came down the valley at regular intervals, I marched on, sending in party after party. The last had just cleared off when two huge shells dropped plumb in the cutting, where they had been working. On our way back to camp I met an officer of the R.E. Company to whom we were attached. He asked me why I was taking the men in. I explained the reason, but he said, "If you take the men in like this the line will never be completed." "And if all the men get killed it won't get completed either," I retorted. "Oh! we can always get another Battalion," was his sympathetic reply. I thanked him, and marched on.

"B" Company were the next to get chased off. A ballast train had come up to the junction and stayed there, sending up huge columns of smoke from the two engines. Of course, there was only one result. An avalanche of shells dropped all round; the train was hurriedly backed off, and "B" Company, who were working next to it found shells pitching and bursting right amongst them. A hurried order was passed to scatter and clear, and in a few seconds all were out, and were making their way back to camp by devious routes. Here they fell in, and a roll call being taken, six were found to be missing. I happened to be in command of the Battalion, as the C.O. was on leave, and asked all men who were willing to go back and search the cutting to step forward. To their credit, the whole Company stepped out without hesitation. A search party was then selected, but five of the missing men arrived before they set off. With a small party, the Adjutant and I proceeded to the cutting. We found the lower portions of a man's legs, with puttees and boots still on, but nothing with which to identify him.

Returning to camp, we found our missing man had returned safe and sound.

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Who the unlucky soldier was we never knew. The dixie men remembered giving a cup of tea to an infantryman passing down from the trenches a few minutes before, and we concluded it must have been he. We buried the remains in a cemetery near, and placed over the grave a cross with the sad but, alas, all too familiar inscription :—

"An unknown British Soldier."

The weather was now wet and unpleasant, and our work necessitated the men standing up to their ankles in mud and water. Trench feet became rather prevalent and sick parade in the morning was a comical sight. Some men were unable to get their boots on, owing to the swollen state of their feet, and used to struggle along with their feet in two small boxes, which they lifted with ropes at each forward pace.

I am afraid our first Christmas in France was not exactly a merry one, though everything that could be done for the comfort of the men was done by our C.O., Colonel Bryan. In the morning we had church parade and communion, then followed dinner, "roast beef and plum pudding" (the latter supplied by the kindness of the *Manchester Guardian*) followed by dessert of apples, oranges and figs. Some days previously, the quartermaster had visited Amiens and had obtained a plentiful supply of beer. I don't think the national drink was ever more appreciated than on this occasion.

On New Year's Eve, we were visited by carol singers, who sang sweet melodies to the tune of a tin whistle. We watched the old year out, and drank the health of our loved ones at home with a hearty wish that next Christmas would find us once more with them and this awful conflict ended.

Going on leave was a gigantic undertaking in these days. I started on January 2nd, in state, in the C.O.'s car, but such was the state of the camp, that to get on to the road, a team of horses was hitched to the front axle, and we were hauled through mud and water right across the camp, to the great amusement of the lookers-on. The leave train was timed to leave Amiens at 5 a.m., but as the previous day it was nine hours late, I hoped to be able to catch it. I arrived at 12 noon to find the train had left at 10-30, and was instructed to report next morning at 5 a.m. I spent the remainder of the day exploring the town and cathedral of Amiens, and presented myself at the station next morning as ordered. There was, of course, no train, but the R.T.O. told us that it had left Albert and might be in any minute. This prevented us from leaving the station and returning to our hotels, so we sat on our packs on the platform on that cold and rainy morning and waited with resignation.

Day broke on a remarkable scene. Lying all over the platform were men straight from the trenches and covered with mud, sleeping peacefully on the hard stone with their heads pillowed on their packs. At 7 a.m. the canteen opened and we were able to get hot coffee and rolls to sustain us during our weary wait. At 10-30 the train arrived and, at last, we were off. All that day and night we travelled and arrived at Le Havre at 4-30 next morning, embarking that night for Southampton at 9 p.m.

If the journey home was bad and we could put up with a lot of inconveniences when going on leave, the journey back was even worse. We left the rest camp at 4 a.m., entrained at 4-30, and started at 5. The weather was extremely cold, snow was falling and the carriages were like ice-houses ;

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and to add to our discomfort one pane of glass was missing from the window. Of course, there was no heating apparatus, but by the aid of numerous blankets and rugs we managed to exist during our twenty-eight hours' journey. I arrived at Plateau (Carnoy) Station at 9 a.m., having accepted an invitation from an A.S.C. officer to join him in his camp there at breakfast. To our dismay we found no trace of any camp at the railhead, only a wide expanse of snow, and discovered later that his company had moved up three days before.

I found my Battalion in the camp where I had left them, and at the same work, but with very different surroundings. I left in rain and mud, and returned in frost and snow and biting cold. Luckily, we had a good supply of fuel, for all around us were old Bosche dugouts blown in by our shell-fire. We used to excavate down these and take out the timbers forming the roofs. These were usually three layers of tree trunks, varying in diameter from 20in. to 12in., besides the side props of small size. In spite of all, one man died from cold and exposure in his hut on an exceptionally cold night.

Work was now extremely difficult, the frost had penetrated several feet into the ground, and excavating was well-nigh impossible. But it had to be done, and we did our best; but I am afraid the results were not equal to the labour we put in.

Visibility had now improved and the days were clear and bright, and almost every day we had periodical "strafes." We used to arrange different shelters, a group of trenches for each section to bolt to in case the shelling came too near, and in this way, by avoiding confusion and crowding, the men, led by their N.C.O.'s were got clear away time after time with the loss of only one killed—Pte. Clare—although many had slight wounds, including several "Blighties."

One of the narrowest escapes was that of Lieut. Tudor and Sergt. Johnson, who were discussing the advisability of withdrawing the men, when an 8in. shell—luckily a "dud"—buried itself under the track not five yards away. It was the only "dud" sent, the other seven all exploding in a direct line across the track.

The line had now been laid up to the top of the High Wood crest, and the Bosche shelled almost every small party that attempted to cross (in fact notices had been erected stating that "not more than ten men at a time were to march across the summit, and then only in extended order"), as it was under direct supervision from the Hun trenches. It was then decided to our great relief not to project the track further, and shortly afterwards "A" and "C" Companies were ordered to move back to Willow Avenue camp at Fricourt.

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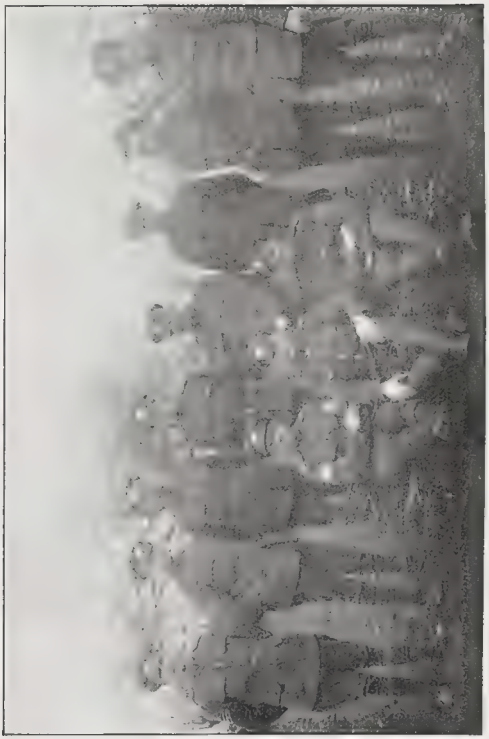

The Backbone of the Company.

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CHAPTER III.

Pozieres, Bapaume and Havrincourt.

February—May, 1917.

With great rejoicing we marched out on February 11th, to our new hutted camp, devoutly thankful to escape for a short while from the incessant shellings by day and night that we had been experiencing, and expecting that a move of four miles to the rear ought to place us in comparative safety. But hardly had the men been dismissed to their huts, when "crack," right overhead came the sound of bursting shrapnel, followed by a rain of bullets on the iron roofs of the huts. Eleven more followed in quick succession, the splinters falling like hail. Then came a short lull, and we decided immediately to go round and inspect. Lieut. Tudor and I only just stepped out of the door of our hut when we heard a whizz, and I have a vivid recollection of seeing the earth going up like a volcano, a few yards away, as we dived together back through the door and landed in a heap inside. We measured the distance after, and found a 5·9 had pitched eight yards away from us!!! This one was again the forerunner of twelve H.E.'s which landed all around us, including one "dud" in the cookhouse. It seemed almost incredible that though I counted forty holes in one hut alone, not one single man was hit; truly it seemed as if our Company had a charmed life.

Our work was now as follows:—"A" Coy. maintenance and repairs on the metre gauge line to Guillemont and Guinchy, and "C" Coy., on the re-grading of part of the main line we had laid. I am afraid "A" Coy. had far the worst of it, as Guillemont and Guinchy were not exactly health resorts at that time, and scarcely a day passed without one or more parties being shelled off their work.

On the morning of February 16th, I was sitting in my orderly room, when a terrific explosion occurred, the hut seemed to rise off the ground and the roof to spring in and out like a whip. We rushed out to see a huge column of smoke arising about three miles away. The ammunition dump at Plateau had been fired by a lucky shot and had gone up. I visited the scene next day and the wreckage was something appalling.

We were busily engaged on the Albert-Bapaume line through Poziers village when the news came through that the Germans had evacuated Bapaume. The day immediately preceding this they had shelled all round heavily, cross roads and railheads coming in for special attention. This was their regular practice, presumably to cover the withdrawal of guns and troops. On the morning of the 19th, I was able to get into Bapaume, and after looking round, stood for a while on the steps of the Town Hall. Two days or so afterwards we heard that this building had been blown up by a delayed-action mine!!!

Owing to the great retreat our lines had become too far in rear and other communications being available, all work on them was stopped, and we were ordered to stand fast for a move.

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Peronne was expected to be our destination, but to our surprise we were sent north from Albert, and after waiting in Aveloy Station for night to fall, we arrived ultimately at Beausart at midnight. Despite the lateness of the hour we had to set to and off-load our baggage. The night was pitch-dark and heavy hail and sleet were falling, making the handling of tents and stores most unpleasant. Then our task completed, we tramped through about twelve inches of liquid mud, to our billets in the half-ruined barns of the village. The chief feature of the place was the number of rats. Never have I seen or heard such a ferocious crowd. In the barns they used to gallop over the sleeping men, and several reported sick with bites on the face, where the brutes had attacked them while they slept. My own billet had a loft over with a staircase leading directly into a farmyard. Up these stairs, until I closed it, the rats used to hop in their hundreds and career over the ceilings. The latter were only of canvas stretched under the beams, and we could see lines of rats advancing across like the waves of the ocean.

On this particular job and during our stay here, we were for a time remote from shell-fire, but in other respects the conditions were worse. The weather was particularly unkind, and treated us very badly. We worked in two shifts, from 4 a.m. to 12 noon, and noon to 8 p.m. This meant that the early shift had to rise at 3 a.m., parade and march to the station in the dark, entrain to Colincamps and there change on to the trucks of chalk with which we had to ballast the track, and travel over the military line to our work. The route lay along the valley north of Serre, right through a belt of country where for mile after mile there was not an inch of ground that had not been turned over by shell-fire. Viewed in the grey dawn of a March morning, a more desolate sight could not be imagined. The craters formed a continuous succession of ridges and depressions like a huge honeycomb, only filled with filthy water, which, owing to the chemical action of the explosives had turned into many colours, red, green and yellow predominating.

Serre existed only in name, no trace of the village remaining; but Pusieux still had the semblance of a town, though hardly a wall remained, and the shattered roofs and timber frames of the house stood out like skeletons against the sky. Near the church I found the remains of an ammunition column that had been caught by our fire while retreating, and could trace, frozen hard in the mud, parts of the wheels and the bodies of the six horses of at least two limbers of the column. Still further on we found further evidence of the hurried retreat, in the numbers of broken wagons with their horses still harnessed, but lying dead around them, and the quantity of war material of all sorts that had been abandoned.

On either side of the line, the ground rose sharply, and on the southern side the Hun had placed his batteries. Each gun had been erected in a pit, covered over and having a staircase leading to a deep dugout on either side; these dugouts led into one another and had, as well, an exit to the valley in the rear. Thus it was possible to travel from end to end of the position by a series of underground galleries without appearing above ground at all. On the reverse side of the valley were the cookhouses. These consisted of several large underground rooms fitted with cooking stoves of modern design, and having store rooms and pantries attached with a living room lined with sleeping berths for the cooks.

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Some marvellous shooting had been done here by our batteries. A shell had been plarted in the centre of each gun-pit, and the mouth of every staircase except one, had been blown in, and yet apart from these, no other shell-holes were visible ; truly a great testimony to the accuracy of our gunners.

For three weeks we laboured here, over some of the worst ground conceivable for railway making. Almost every-day it rained, and day after day we journeyed as day was dawning in these open trucks, through torrents of hail and storms of sleet and snow, yet, in spite of all, of almost 1,000 men, our daily sick parade did not reach double figures.

In Miraumont, which lay just off our line, we were fortunate in seeing an Indian cavalry division returning from action. Troop after troop rode through the village, the picked horsemen of our great Indian Empire, their eyes flashing with the light of battle from their dusky faces, proud to have taken their part in this great fight for freedom, true descendants of a nation of warriors. I shall never forget the sight—it made such a deep impression on us all of the resources of our great Empire.

Though, as I have said, we were free from shelling, we had an almost worse risk to guard against, this was the danger of the explosion of the numerous mines that had been laid all along the old main line, especially in the vicinity of Achiet-le-Grand and Bapaume. While working in the deep cutting just south of the former, we heard one go up in the station. The following day we went to inspect the crater, but on hearing another go up near by, we retired in haste.

On April 18th, we moved camp to Bihucourt and commenced the work of laying a double track from Achiet-le-Grand to Bapaume. We were warned especially to beware of booby traps which abounded here. Scarcely a dugout but had a trip wire at the bottom,or a loose step which, when stepped on, fired a mine. Most of these had been disconnected and rendered harmless by the engineers, but some still remained. They were particularly numerous in the railway embankment and cutting, and I must own it was " windy " work working with the thought always present with us that the whole track might go up any moment.

From here we visited the Butte of Warlencourt and were frankly disappointed. Instead of the huge natural earth-work we had been led to expect, there only remained a small hillock, the rest had been literally shot away by the continuous shelling of our heavies. We were also within easy distance of Bapaume, and paid repeated visits to that unfortunate city. The church showed striking evidence of the bestiality of the Hun ; the central pillars had been blown down and the vaults under the aisles had been broken open exposing countless skulls. Our M.O., who accompanied us, pointed out several that bore a distinct mark of the guillotine, probably dating from the French Revolution.

Our existence as a Battalion now came to an end, and on May 14th, we became re-constituted as the 58th 59th Labour Companies.

As senior Captain I was given command of the former, and was allowed, by the kindness of the C.O., to choose which Company should join my own. I had no hesitation in selecting " A " Company, who had been on detachment so often with me, and have never had occasion to regret my choice. I was

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also extremely lucky in my officers. Lieut. Tudor was still with me, Lieut. Worrall came over with his Company and Lieut. Woolcock completed an excellent trio. Our C.O., Colonel Bryan, became Group Commander under the new Labour Corps Scheme, taking with him the Adjutant and Quartermaster to form the 56th Group, by whom we were for a short while administered.

But we were not destined to remain long. Exactly a week after, we were ordered to move to Velu to build a new line, following up the advance, from Fremicourt to Havrincourt. We entrained at our camp and travelled via Bapaume. The latter part of the line lay over the crest of a hill, and ours was the first train to travel over by daylight. At Velu we camped in a meadow just outside the western edge of the chateau grounds. The chateau itself had been used as a hospital by the Germans, but had been mined and blown up during their retreat. Most of the furniture and objects of art had been carried away, but in the pile of debris could be clearly seen remains of the heating and lighting system, radiators and chandeliers, twisted and broken among the piles of carved stone and brick. The owner had evidently been a racing man, for there were a magnificent range of stables, chiefly loose boxes, with all necessary conveniences. They had faired better than the house itself and were fairly intact. The grounds were a pitiful sight, most of the huge ornamental trees had been felled across the drives and pathways, while others had been broken and dismembered by shell-fire. These wooded grounds were a regular target for Fritz, and not a day or night passed without them receiving a severe strafing.

On Sunday, May 27th, he lengthened his range slightly and drove us helter-skelter out of camp. There was no time to form up, so we chased the men out as the shells fell just on the eastern edge of our camp ground. We got out unscathed, but the next camp of R.F.A.'s suffered heavily.

A day or two after we had reached almost to the Nord Canal, and Lieut. Woolcock and I, seeing a huge earth work in front strolled over to it. We found it had been formed of the excavations of the canal, which here flowed through a tunnel. From the top we had an excellent view of the surrounding country and the village in front. On our way down we asked what was the name of the village and were told it was Havrincourt. We then discovered that the troops we had been watching were Bosche, as the village was still in his hands ! ! !

As the advance had ceased, our work came to a sudden stop, and on May 30th, we marched back into Bapaume and entrained for Belgium to prepare for the long-expected push in the Ypres salient. With us went a company of the Devons and one of Royal Fusiliers with Colonel Cordeaux as Group Commander. We left at 2-30 p.m. and travelled leisurely along, very leisurely indeed, as the following incident will show.

Our coach lay at the rear end of the train, and our orderlies, anticipating tea time, and having no fire, worked their way right up to the front. Seeing a likely-looking cottage adjoining the line, they jumped off, purchased some fresh eggs, obtained boiling water, and although the train had never stopped, had tea ready and waiting for us by the time we arrived at the spot !

We arrived at Poperinghe next morning at 11 a.m., and waited some time

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in the square outside the station looking longingly at a sign still hanging on a defunct café wall " Bifstick à toute heure."

Pop by the way, possessed a number of these " English " signs. The most remarkable I came across were " Dinner every time," and " English shop sold here."

About mid-day we marched off over the pave to our destination, near International Corner and pitched our tents amongst the trees and undergrowth in Duffield Wood, well concealed from any enemy aircraft.

Our Construction Train.

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CHAPTER IV.

Ypres Salient, Elverdinghe.

June—July, 1917.

At this time there were no light railways east of International Corner railhead, and those, who later on visited the salient, will realize the amount of work that was accomplished in completing the great network of lines that afterwards threaded their way over the ridge to the foot of Paschendale.

For the first few days we were left in comparative peace and quietness, but this happy state did not last long. Troops, principally Artillery, were moving up to take over from the Belgians, and gun positions were being established everywhere. Myriads of spies abounded, and it is perfectly certain that the Germans had full knowledge of every movement. We particularly noticed this in the neighbourhood of Woesten. A Belgian battery had held the wood without loss for months and with scarcely a single shell troubling them, but the very night after they had moved out and the British in, the wood was strafed for hours.

On Sunday, June 3rd, from our line, a few hundred yards N.E. of Elverdinghe, we watched a terrific bombardment of that village. Over 700 shells burst on the cross roads, in the chateau grounds and around the Church, throwing up huge clouds of smoke and flame, in the midst of which could be dimly seen fragments of all kinds. It seemed as if nothing could live in such an area and yet a friend of mine who was unlucky enough to be billeted in the trenches and dugouts there, told me that they escaped with very few casualties, though chased from end to end of the wood for hours.

From now on, over a period of twelve months, until we were withdrawn from the salient in May, 1918, our work was carried out to the accompaniment of bursting shells and bombs. Scarcely a day passed without one or more parties being shelled off and the number of narrow escapes were legion.

On the 6th, two men were wounded by shrapnel, after a lively three days of continuous shell-dodging. On Thursday, the Company had just passed an estaminet at International Corner, when a shell struck it and blew half of it right away. The next day we lost one of our best Pte. Bilsborough being accidentally drowned while bathing, despite the gallant efforts of Pte. Bowen and a R.E. sapper.

This cast quite a gloom over the Company, Bilsborough being a great favourite. A willing worker and cheerful comrade, a first-rate sport, our centre-forward and mainstay of our soccer team, we missed his cheery presence everywhere.

One of our tasks was to take railway material forward at night, over a stretch of country where by day we were in full view of the enemy from his position on the Pilkem Ridge. The very first night the party went out they were shelled while loading, and shelled when pulling out with their load. The loading party were shelled when returning to camp at 1 a.m. and the line was blown up right in front of the train as it returned empty. Someone must have been giving information! The loading party, owing to the

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shelling, had to make a detour and passed in rear of a farm. From the upper windows the N.C.O. saw a light being flashed. He investigated and found the farm full of Belgian soldiers, so withdrew and informed the A.P.M., with what result I do not know ; but it was certainly most peculiar to have a light flashing at that hour in the morning, even if it were in the direction of our line ! ! !

We were now working well forward, through the breast-works that here formed the second and third line Belgian trenches. It was a fairly hot corner, and several mornings we found that most of our previous day's work had been blown away and we had to do it all over again.

One party in particular had an exciting time. With Lieut. Worrall in charge and numbering about thirty men they had gone forward with an R.E. officer as guide to locate a new line. The morning was foggy and the latter evidently lost his way and failed to find his guide peg, still he wandered further and further forward through several trench systems, till at last Worrall became suspicious and halted in the last. The R.E. pointed out a dim line about 80 yards away which he insisted was the beginning of the grade. From Belgian soldiers standing near, Worrall elicited the information that they were then standing in the front line trench. " Well, what's that over there ? " asked the R.E. pointing to the " line." " The Bosche parapet " was the startling reply. On hearing this, the section dived under cover, and though they had advanced over the open they were careful to go back down the communication trench. The only explanation why they were not fired at was, that in the fog, the Bosche must have taken them for Belgians ! ! !

In addition to the daily shelling on the works, we had a fair dose around our camp, but luckily none fell actually within it. Three mornings in succession an enemy bombing 'plane flew low over us. It arrived regularly at 4 a.m., just as the cookhouse fires were being lighted. The first day it was so low that the cooks bolted out of their cookhouse thinking the pilot was making a forced landing. The fourth morning I laid in wait for him with a rifle, as he had been within easy range, almost touching the tops of the trees, but he failed to put in an appearance.

About 200 yards south of us stood a Belgian farm. During one of the periodical strafes, several shells fell in the yard. The farmer rushed out and led away the horse, his wife followed with the cow, locking their five young children in the house, evidently considering them of less value than the stock.

Sunday, the 24th, we had a rest day ; at least it was intended to be restful, but Fritz thought otherwise. Just after our mid-day meal he started shelling the woods heavily. One fell just short of our camp and another in a direct line just beyond us. Anticipating the rest to land right amongst us, we rushed all the men out of camp into the open field beyond, and there sat down and watched, and waited. Again we were lucky to escape with no casualties, but the camp on either side suffered ; one of the Guards pioneer battalions just beyond us losing eleven men.

The following day, while forming the grade across the Woesten Road, four shells fell in quick succession on the Pavé road. The men dived into the ditches until the salvo finished, and then bolted for shelter. As soon as

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all were clear they fell in, and one man was found to be missing. We went back to look for him and searched the ditch on one side all in vain. His N.C.O. had just come to the conclusion that he must have been blown to pieces, when up from the other ditch appeared first a cap, then a pair of startled spectacled eyes, and a squeaky voice cried out, "Is it quite safe now, Sergeant?" He had been lying so close that we had failed to find him.

Our luck deserted us two days later. A party of fifteen had just passed the same spot, when the first shell of a series fell right amongst them, killing the N.C.O. and four others instantly, and wounding seven others—three so seriously that they died that night; three others were knocked down by the concussion, and one man only out of the party escaped untouched. Lieut. Worrall and the nearest section, despite the continued shelling, rushed up and succeeded in getting the wounded away. One of these, Pte. Murphy, although wounded seriously in four places, after being carried to a place of safety, stated he was allright and begged his rescuer to go back, "As there were others worse than himself." This was our first bad smash, and all behaved magnificently, every man volunteering for rescue work.

By way of a diversion, in order to take the men's minds off the incessant shelling, as many football matches as possible were arranged. But even the football ground itself suffered. On one particular day, during an exciting match, one team were making a great attack when a shell pitched near. They dropped like one man, but the unfortunate goalie, jumping up to save a shot, failed to get down quickly enough and was outed. We arrived half an hour later to find a goal post smashed and a huge hole just alongside. This was promptly filled up, the post mended, and the match played; but somehow or other the goalie at that end did not play up to his reputation, showing signs of nervousness.

The country was now swarming with troops, and it was impossible to walk anywhere without stumbling over concealed batteries and gun positions. The battery commanders were inclined to use fearful language to us when our line was built close to their carefully-selected positions. They swore we were like birds of ill omen, drawing shell-fire on to them, for railways were always a favourite target for enemy gunners, and the sight of about 400 men extended along the track building a narrow thread of a grade always proved irresistible to them.

July opened with an exceedingly lively day. So heavy was the shelling that we were driven off the track, and had eventually to march the men back to camp. The following day, on the A. 8 Line, three shells dropped in the corner of the field where the men were having their mid-day meal, but landing in soft marshy ground did no damage, beyond splashing everyone with mud.

On the third day, Lieut. Woolcock and his platoon had a nasty experience. Working just west of Elverdinghe, they were under direct observation from a Bosche balloon. They had just crossed the main road when they found themselves cut off and surrounded by a barrage of shells. Salvos of four landed in quick succession on three sides of the party, and on the fourth, single shells seemed to race up and down the road. Crouching low in the ditches that flanked the line, the men waited, quite unable to get out of that square of fire. At length the strafing of one side ceased, and Lieut. Woolcock

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with commendable initiative, rushed the men through the gap and got all clear away. A minute or two after, when the battery recommenced, the range had been shortened and the shells were falling right across the trenches where the men had been ! ! !

Looking over my diary for this month, I find almost daily, notes such as the following: Shelled off work. Gas alarm, midnight. Air raid, 2 a.m. Line broken in four places. Dump fired alongside us. Shelled all round, from 11 to 2 p.m., etc. Truly it was a lively month, and a period of constant strain.

Early on the morning of the 28th, a shell struck a truck of 12in. shells lying in a gun spur, just off our track, sending the debris across in such quantities that our line was blocked. While clearing this away, a nose cap accidentally exploded, killing Sergt. Ellis and wounding twelve others. One of the latter Pte. Fernley, the stretcher bearer assisted in bandaging the other eleven ; and not till this had been finished did he even mention that he was wounded, although it was subsequently found he was hit in four places. Sergt. Ellis had only just returned from his first leave and had during that time been married. In him we lost one of our oldest N.C.O.'s and our best cricketer, who, on more than one occasion, had won a match on his own by his sensational bowling.

At last, after innumerable postponements, the Big Push started. For nights the bombardment had been gradually growing more and more intense, till reaching a climax on the early morning of the 31st, the troops went over the top. Two days before, one of the many dates that the push had been advertised to take place, several labour companies had marched up to the canal in column of route, with bag and baggage, only to find that the Bosche still held the eastern side, and they had to beat a hurried retreat, as the trenches and roads that they had been detailed to consolidate and repair, were still in enemy hands ! ! !

In these days we used to travel to work, over the lines we had laid, in two trains. The route lay in places, as I have said, under direct observation from the Hun. As we approached this portion, the engine drivers used to cram on more and more speed, until we at length ran the gauntlet at the utmost speed our engines were capable of. I think we were really more afraid of the whole train jumping the track than the occasional shelling we received.

One evening, owing to heavy shelling, the men were sent across the open in small parties of about twelve. One party had almost reached cover on the far side when a H.E. pitched on the opposite side of the track. With one accord the men dived for the shallow ditches that flanked the line, but unfortunately the last man fell on top of the one in front and left part of his anatomy exposed, sustaining a nasty flesh wound, which necessitated him lying on his face in hospital for some weeks. On another occasion, a platoon had just finished their mid-day meal, when a shell struck the bank behind them. They at once bolted to the wood near for cover. The next pitched into the fire they had been sitting round, and a large fragment of shell rebounding from a tree, caught "Erb" bending. Surprised at this rear attack he danced round, rubbing the place vigorously, and singing out "I'm hit, I'm hit," while the others rudely laughed.

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Our Socker Team.

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CHAPTER V.

Boesinghe, Pilkem Ridge, Langemark.

August—September, 1917.

Our camp at Duffield Woods being too far from our work, we moved on August 17th to a wood near Woesten, at the junction of the A.1. and A. 8. Lines, on which we were employed. The second night, just after "last post," everyone had turned in, and I was completing some of the numerous Army Forms, when from the corner of the wood came a terrific roar, preceded by a blaze of light and a blast that outed all the lights and shook the tents so violently that the sides seemed to meet in the middle. Out rushed everyone in all sorts of attire. What had happened? Had a shell landed amongst us or had a mine gone up? No one could tell.

We were making a hurried inspection of the camp in the dark, when there came another flash and roar right over us. Then we realized that during the darkness a 12in. railway gun had been brought up and was firing, from a gun spur on the edge of the wood, right over us. We were treated to this entertainment for several nights and had to remove the tents nearest to that corner of the wood, as the men complained that the concussion lifted them up while they lay asleep, and they were awakened by falling back on to the hard ground!

Owing to the persistent and regular bombing, the whole Company was practically "confined to camp" at this period. We were located in the centre of a square of agricultural land, with Elverdinghe, Woesten, De Wippe Cabaret and Dromore Corner at the four angles, and every night these roads would be bombed for hours. I believe that at this time no traffic was permitted on these roads after sunset. Worrall and I discovered this to our cost.

We were detailed for a F.G.C.M. near La Lovie, and returning via Poperhinghe, we had dined there, and visited one of the numerous concert parties. We then started our walk home, expecting to be able to jump a lorry, but none were to be seen. We had hardly walked a mile when we could hear high up the unmistakable sound of a Gotha, and could see the flashes of the exploding "eggs" on the road in front. Down the nearest side road we bolted and waited for the brute to pass, and then retraced our way and continued our march. Again we failed to make much progress. Within fifteen minutes another could be heard, and off the road we had to skip again. Four times we repeated this delightful experience. I say delightful, because in our having to get well away from the main road, we had no time to choose our way, and found ourselves splashing the mud and water up to our knees. We decided that, attractive as "Pop" and the theatre might be, we would hesitate before visiting them again.

Alongside our line at Kemmelbeke there was a kite balloon stationed. On September the 2nd the Bosche planted a shell plump into the middle of it as the men were hauling it along some fifty feet off the ground. The gas

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of course immediately fired, the whole going up like a tongue of flame. No one was injured, though some of the crew were slightly burned, and our nearest party, less than fifty yards away, were almost scorched with the blast.

A few days later we took over the maintenance of the "A" lines over Pilkem Ridge, working directly under the O.C. Lines.

It is really impossible to describe properly the conditions under which this work was carried on. Volumes have been written on the state of the ground and the terrific shelling in this area. Mr. Philip Gibbs, writing later in *The Daily Telegraph*, referred to the first four miles in rear of the trenches here as a "zone so shelled that no one can pass above ground by day in safety." The second four miles as a "zone harassed day and night by shells of all calibres, where men have to spend their lives as creatures of an underworld." In the same article (I am writing from memory only) he further states, "The problem of keeping the front line supplied with munitions and food is a stupendous one, but it will be done. It will be done by parties of men working daily on roads and railways, through this awful mud, subjected to incessant shelling, sharing in all the risks but none of the glory." This I think fully sums up the position. We were working daily in the open in the first zone, right up to within 800 yards of the trenches, and were living in tents, and later in Nissen Huts, in the second.

My daily diary for September was as follows:—

September 6th.—Camp bombed at 12, midnight, and shelled at 1 a.m. Had to move horse lines. Bombed again at 2 a.m. and 3 a.m., one casualty. Up to Langemarck with Major H—— to take over railway system on Pilkem Ridge. Heavy strafe by our guns over us, while returning on the old Staden Railway; failed to cross the ridge, and waited in an old Bosche pill-box for the storm to pass over.

September 7th.—Men shelled off "Rugby" and "Bushey," two hit (one since died in hospital).

The phrase "shelled off" occurs so often that perhaps I had better try and illustrate what it meant.

Can my readers imagine the following scene: A small party of from six to a dozen men working alone, busy repairing breaks in the line, amid that awful waste, with, as a rule, not another living soul in sight. Suddenly comes a shriek of a shell, perhaps a salvo of four, pitching close to the party. There is no need for a word of command, every man knows that when shells fall near there are only two classes, "the quick and the dead," and like one man they drop instantly to the ground, taking what cover they can. If they are lucky and the first shells fall clear, as soon as the salvo is finished and the pieces cease flying, they are up and off, racing away at right angles to the direction the shell travelled, and taking refuge in any convenient trench or dugout. Here they remain till the Huns' firing has subsided, feeling the thud, thud as the shells strike the ground and watching the muck and splinters fly through the air. Frequently their temporary shelter comes in for a share of the strafe, and then there's a second race to a more remote spot. But what if they are not quick enough, and the first shell falls among them? Then come those scenes, of which we hear so little and which happen so often, of men staying

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with their wounded comrades, helping them along, refusing to leave, though every minute might be their last. After the shelling has finished, it may be in five minutes, it may be in five hours, there is a hurried roll-call, and the party return to their interruptied work to find their task increased ten-fold. But are they downhearted? No! If there were no casualties, they are all laughing and chaffing each other over who ran the fastest!!

September 8th. -Bombing raid on Elverdinghe Road. Men shelled off all works at 6 p.m.

September 9th. -" Brick Spur " party shelled out, took shelter in old trenches, which were immediately blown in on top of them. Several men had to be dug out. Three men wounded.

September 10th. " Raf " and platoon shelled heavily. Three wounded (one seriously).

September 11th. Sergeant Ward recommended for M.M. for bringing seven wounded of another labour company out of the " Brick Spur " under fire. After being shelled out himself, he saw others in difficulties, brought out the slightly wounded, returned and assisted the walking wounded. Brought up his tractor and despatched the badly wounded to hospital, and then removed those who had been killed. Working parties shelled heavily. One man wounded.

September 12th. Daylight air raid at 3 p.m., ten enemy 'planes just missed our camp. Many casualties in the next camp. Camp shelled at 5 p.m., just as men returned.

September 13th. Shelled off " Rugby."

September 14th. Camp shelled at 12-30 p.m. Dunstaple new spur heavily shelled at 10 a.m. One casualty.

September 15th. Line shelled heavily all round. One casualty. Fifteen breaks repaired.

September 16th. - Line shelled. Eighteen breaks repaired. One man died of wounds.

September 17th. -Camp again shelled. One man wounded.

September 18th. -" Nuneaton " shelled just after our train passed. Shelled off " Tamworth." This was a very lively day. The Bosche had evidently got wind of a projected advance and plastered the lines, roads and ridges with all kinds of stuff. Twenty-four breaks in line repaired. The line had been hit and the switch points blown out. While engaged in putting in a new set, two shells fell close to the party. They immediately doubled to the nearest cutting for shelter, but as if he knew their movements, the Bosche followed them from place to place, drove them from the cutting into some trenches, blew these in and sent them out again. Altogether he chased them for nearly a mile before his spasm of hate exhausted itself. An emergency gang, consisting of four men and two of the original party, who had simply dropped into the ditch and let the shelling pass over them, at once set to work to carry on. Careful observation disclosed the fact that three distinct lines were being shelled in turns: a row of batteries on the ridge, 120 yards E. of us, the line we were on and the batteries stationed along it, and thirdly,

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a battery of 6in. Naval Guns some 150 yards beyond us. So one watched the shells dropping, while the others calmly proceeded with the work with as little nervousness as if they were at work on railways at home. The watcher noted eight shells fall on the first line, then a short pause. It was an anxious moment. Which line would get it next? The answer came promptly in the whine of a shell passing over us and landing near the batteries on line number three. Seven more and then another pause. But we didn't wait to see where the next would land. Knowing Fritz's methodical mind we guessed, and guessed right, that our line would get it, and so bolted into a disused dugout, where we sat tight until we saw he had removed his attention again to No. 1. This worked quite smoothly, but once he altered the sequence, and then we had to race for it. Four times in all we repeated the motion before we were able to complete the job and get away.

September 19th.—"No working parties allowed east of Canal," so ran the Army order, "except those working on light railways," who were asked to make a special effort to keep the lines going to allow the wounded to be brought down in ambulance trains over the light railways.

Reading the foregoing, we expected a lively day, and we had it. scarcely a minute but something was going up. Every party was shelled off, the section in the "Brick Spur" being chased out six times (the previous average was only four times a day.) One party sheltering in a cutting, with their backs against the eastern bank, had the bank blown in on top of them, and were blown right across the metals. Yet in spite of all, only one man was wounded.

September 20th.—A repetition of the preceding day. Three casualties. Lieut. Woolcock and Sergeant Rafferty, crossing from one party to another, nearly copped one, only a quick dive saving them. Returning later, they saw two empty tea dixies on the line, but no sign of the "Dixie King." Shrapnel was falling heavily, and three men had already been wounded, so they hunted all round, fearing the worst, and had nearly given him up for lost when from a shell-hole they heard a jovial whistle, and there seated quite comfortably, and holding over his tin hat a thin sheet of iron, was the missing man. In reply to a question, he said, "I'm quite all right, sir; they can't hit me through this."

It was on this day that Pte. Riding and his party so well earned their distinctions, though I did not know it at the time, Pte. Riding, who was in charge of the party, merely reporting in the usual way, "Two breaks repaired at Tamworth, five new lengths put in." It was hearing a casual conversation next day that caused me to make enquiries. I give below the official record of the deed:

No. 34597	Pte. RIDING, W.	Awarded the D.C.M.
No. 34537	Pte. MEADOWS, A.	Awarded the M.M.
No. 34541	Pte. MAYLOR, J. H.	Awarded the M.M.
No. 34574	Pte. PHILLIPS, F.	Awarded the M.M.
No. 34601	Pte. REEKIE, A.	Awarded the M.M.
No. 34429	Pte. HADFIELD, F.	Awarded the M.M.

At Tamworth, on 20th September, 1917, were members of a party detailed to repair several breaks in the light railway line, such repair

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being urgently needed for the passage of ambulance trains.

The party were under very heavy shell-fire from the time the work was started, and one shell blew up one of our guns ten yards away, and ignited some ammunition lying between the party and the gun, causing the gunners to retire.

Every man of the party showed the greatest coolness and bravery, remaining at work and taking out damaged rails, until a shell burst alongside them and compelled them to retire temporarily. They immediately returned to the work, however, and completed the repair.

While still under shell-fire, and in great danger from the burning ammunition, the party went to another break close by, and after carrying rails some two hundred yards, removed the damaged rails, and placed the others in position, being compelled to complete the bolting up while lying flat on their stomachs owing to the heavy shell-fire and their exposed position.

September 21st. Moved camp to outside wood. Bombed at 10 p.m.

September 23rd. —Heavy shelling all over the lines, especially in the morning.

September 24th. One of the very worst days we had. Twelve casualties.

There was a fog; we had only just left our train and were crossing the canal when we could hear the whine and whistle of a number of gas shells coming over. So dense was the fog that we could not see exactly where they were pitching, and the slight explosion hardly afforded a clue. Then two landed on the track in front of us. I felt the smart of the mustard in my eyes, but kept my mouth and nostrils closed, and signalled to the men to retire. With masks on we crossed, and reached the hill beyond. There for four hours we could hear as we worked salvo after salvo of gas shells passing over us and landing in the hollow near the canal, but still the fog prevented us from knowing exactly where they were. Then as the fog lifted at 10 a.m. we were treated to two hours' bombardment of H.E. Twelve breaks were repaired in spite of all, and at mid-day we moved off, only to run right into a big air raid. Luckily we were near a sand spur, and were able to burrow into the side of the sand ballast furthest from the track of the bombs.

September 25th. —Shelled off Rugby and Tamworth all day. Bad bombing raid at 9 p.m. Several men, 37 mules and one horse killed in next camp to us by three bombs.

September 26th. No other working parties allowed east of canal. I nearly got one; a 5·9 pitched just the other side of a breast work trench as I passed from party to party.

Returning home train jumped rails and almost capsized down the embankment.

September 27th. —Out from midnight to 4 a.m. with a ballast train. 'Planes over us all the time, but no bombs dropped near us.

September 28th. —Another bad air raid last night and early this morning. 'Planes in relays over us every twenty minutes from 6 p.m. until 6 a.m. Heavy shelling near Rugby at 3 p.m. Line broken in nine places and thrown out for 200 yards. On one side of the line were four 8in. Howitzers, and on the other the B.C. post and the dugouts for the men.

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It was in attempting to get these guns that the line had suffered so heavily. We had about half finished the repairs, when to our dismay the gunners started shelling again. Four rounds per gun were sent, and then the gun teams doubled back to their dugouts in rear, and left us in the open to await the reply ! ! ! I told the O.C. it was a dirty trick, after stirring the Hun up and making him really angry, to bolt and leave us there ; but whether the Bosche guns had been knocked out or whether his gunners were at tea I know not. We finished and cleared without mishap, but it was quite an anxious time.

September 29th. Again a heavy raid by seven 'planes. Two men hit in their tents.

September 30th.—The D. of L., Brigadier-General Gibb, visited camp and complimented me on the excellent reports he had received on the work of the Company. "Wherever I go," he said, "from everybody for whom you have worked I have had nothing but praise."

Thus ended a memorable month, and I desire to testify to the extremely gallant conduct of all ranks in the company. Despite the experience they had gone through for the past sixteen months, all except two weeks at Beausart, spent in the forward area, I never had a single case of malingering, the number of sick, excluding wounds, did not exceed two per cent., and in every case where volunteers were asked for to patrol or repair an especially dangerous part of the line, more than double the number required were immediately forthcoming.

The first three days of October the daily shelling of the line continued. Again on the fourth we were the only working parties permitted east of the canal. Patrols of volunteers were sent over all parts of the line every half hour, or oftener if we noticed that any particular portion had been extra heavily shelled. These patrols came in for a large amount of shelling, and at times had to work their way from trench to dugout, and on again by rushes. The control huts abandoned by their occupants were particularly useful as shelters, and formed meeting places for the different parties. I had occasion to go round during the day, and was accompanied by a volunteer, Pte. R ——, S.B. (stretcher bearer). He was a brother Welshman, staunch and steady, and together we marched in single file over the sleepers. I led the way, and with my escort close behind, humming and singing in a deep bass voice Welsh funeral hymns in the minor key, by way of keeping our spirits up.

Lieut. Tudor had left us for a job on the Staff. I had been unwise enough to lend him to fill a vacancy as Group Adjutant, where he did so well that he was appointed Captain on the Staff of the Army Labour Commandant. Lieuts. Worrall and Woolcock were next to leave, to join a fighting unit -the 8th Liverpool Regiment. I felt their loss keenly, for we had been together since the company was formed, while Lieut. Tudor had been second in command of my company ever since we left England as a battalion.

Before the last two actually left 2nd Lieut. P. E. Smith, Artists' Rifles, joined, and a few days after our strength was completed by the arrival of 2nd Lieut. J. W. G. Dunne, R.F.C., and 2nd Lieut. W. J. Harvey, Suffolk Regiment.

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The Site of our Camp.

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CHAPTER VI.

The Steenbecke—Poelcapelle.

October—December, 1917.

The chief features of the months of October and November were the number of enemy air raids by day and by night. Evening after evening, just as twilight was fading, we could hear the unmistakable throb of a Gotha coming over. From the camps all around us would come the danger signal : three blasts of a whistle. Early in the evening these would be given slowly with a short interval between, but as the night wore on and the wind rose higher and higher the pace used to increase, until at last the signal came at the double. We could imagine the blower racing to get his job over and diving back into his dugout before almost the last blast had been completed. Lying in a tent at night, it was very difficult to locate the exact position of the 'plane. It always seemed to be directly overhead, and it was a great relief when we heard the first bomb drop, perhaps half-a-mile away, and realized that the Bosche was at his old game of strafing the roads.

On the 14th we journeyed up to Pilkem Ridge in the wake of a bad raid. Several enemy 'planes had passed over the roads half-an-hour or so before, and had dropped bomb after bomb right from Elverdinghe to the canal, causing numerous casualties and great damage to the transport on the road. We had great difficulty in getting along, the wreckage being considerable. The following day the Bosche came over in force, and bombed the roads near the canal and all the camps in the vicinity in broad daylight. But although so active by day, he still gave us no rest at night, and only on one wet and stormy night during the whole month were we without a visit. On the night of the 16th a bomb dropped a couple of hundred yards west of us, and on the 20th a number fell all around ; the nearest being less than 100 yards, just missing the horse lines. This evening Lieut. Smith and I had gone up with a party to discharge a ballast train. We had only reached Elverdinghe Station when the raid started, and we were ordered not to proceed further, as the line had been broken by a bomb. There was no cover and no shelter to run to, so we had to remain packed tightly in our train for nearly an hour. All the time we could hear the raiders over us, and could see the flashes of the bombs bursting not far away. The searchlights were busy at work, and the din from the anti-aircraft batteries and the machine guns was deafening. We were heartily glad to get moving again, as the station yard was never a comfortable place to remain in.

Two days later a big Gotha was caught in the search light when crossing above us ; the raider promptly dropped the remainder of his basketful in a line across the bottom corner of our camp, the two nearest tents being riddled with splinters. On the 29th, the Hun machines came in relays all night long

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from 10 p.m. till 6 a.m., and threw their bombs in all directions in our neighbourhood; while on the following night he repeated the dose from 7 p.m. until 4 a.m. Frequently during this and the preceding months we had seen the Prince of Wales walking up and down the railway line. One day, near St. Sixte, a French battalion just down from the trenches were waiting to entrain and were being served out with rations. One of the poilus, carrying his tea in one hand, a loaf of bread and a hunk of cheese in the other, crossed immediately in front of the Prince. Being unable to salute, he nodded and smiled, at the same time extending his grub for the Prince's inspection The latter smiled back, saluted, and with a short remark passed on. It was a pleasing little episode, but I often wonder what the poilu would have thought if he had known that the officer he greeted so casually was the son of England's King ?

Accompanied by Lieut. Dunne, I paid my second visit to Ypres, and was shocked to see how greatly that town had suffered. Of the Cathedral only the south doorway remained. The Cloth Hall had only a portion of the tower and the south west wall standing, while of the houses that once flanked the Grand Place only a few piles of brick and stone were left. It was in truth a city of the dead, for with the exception of a few sightseers like ourselves the place was deserted. Our work still lay on the forward lines, maintaining the track and constructing new spurs and sidings. Maintenance was no easy job, for the line had been constructed over a terrible piece of country, and an immense number of shell-holes had been filled in to make the grade. Sand, too, had been largely used for ballasting, and this proved quite unequal to the task of keeping the rails above the mud, which abounded everywhere. Over these shell-holes the line constantly settled, and after a night's heavy traffic the rails had literally to be dug out and packed upon new ballast.

New lines and spurs were constantly being required. Batteries moving forward would select their new positions, often close up to the trenches. A survey would be made by the R.E.'s, and a plan drawn. Then the line would be constructed, the gun pits dug and ammunition brought up in readiness. Last of all, up would come the gun itself, carried on the trucks of the ubiquitous light railway. On one occasion there was an urgent order for a spur for a 9in. battery. The survey was completed and the track pegged out by 8 a.m. Starting to work immediately, we completed the earthworks, or grade, by 12 noon. With the second shift came a load of materials, *i.e.*, rails, sleepers and ballast, and before the evening the job was completed. As soon as darkness had set in the huge guns were brought up and placed in positions, to the great relief of the battery commander.

November opened in a very unpleasant manner; for the first fortnight the men were shelled every day while at work,—Harrow, Bushey and Rugby being special objects for the Hun's hate, and the parties there were shelled off repeatedly. Bushey was bombed also on the morning of the 10th; but we had the satisfaction of seeing one of the raiders brought down in flames by a naval battery near Paschendale. Then on November the 18th we had a respite. We were given the maintenance of the lines back to St. Sixte, and were for a short while free of the daily shelling we had endured for nearly four months.

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But this did not last long. On December 2nd we were ordered to move camp and go forward. The site selected was probably the worst shelled spot in the whole area, namely, the crest of the Pilkem Ridge.

Fortunately for us all, our group commander, Colonel Stewart, with his usual consideration for his companies, was strongly opposed to the idea of placing men in tents in such a deadly spot. Together we visited the ridge and hunted round for a likely site, but in vain. In the whole of the area there was not enough level ground to place more than isolated tents at intervals of perhaps a hundred yards. On the particular spot selected for us an attempt had been made to erect huts. These were now blown to pieces, and as we watched, we saw shells still further rending them. Even the road to the site, though nicely coloured red on the map, had ceased to exist, and the only trace we could find was a heap or two of cobble stones thrown together by the bursting of a shell.

Colonel Stewart sent in a report on the state of the contemplated camping ground that must have appealed even to those at H.Q., who, themselves comfortably housed, selected sites for others from the map. At all events the move was cancelled.

Another reason why we were reluctant to leave our camp was this. We had erected a number of Nissen huts and several shelters, proof against anything other than a direct hit, and into which the more "windy" portion of the men used to get when the air raids became particularly troublesome. We had also a large concert room, constructed out of two Nissen huts placed end to end, but about nine feet apart. This opening was then roofed over, and had an annexe at each side for the wet and dry canteens respectively. One section of floor was left in at each end, forming a stage and gallery, and the remainder was sunk down two feet lower for the pit. Every night as soon as dinner was over the men would flock into "The Hippodrome" and amuse themselves with songs and choruses for hours. Twice a week organised concerts were held under the direction of our musical officer, Lieut. Smith. We were also fortunate in having in the company Private W. Cooper, an excellent pianist, who was never tired of playing on our dulcitone piano, and who accompanied all the singers, with or without music. Among many excellent turns the sketches produced by Privates Silaborn and Rooney deserve special mention. Both were old stage artists, and their presentation of "fatigues," introducing those well-known sanitary experts "Mick" and "Buttercup," was a scream. Singing competitions were a great feature, small prizes being offered for the winner. Particular interest was taken in the contest "For the best song and chorus, the chorus especially to count." Competitors would bring in all the friends they could muster in order to pile up the points, and it often happened that a man with the poorest voice but with a bumping chorus received the prize.

I mentioned previously that our camp was in the centre of a large square of agricultural land. In the dry summer all was well, but as the wet weather set in, the ground, trampled over by thousands of horse and foot every day, became worse and worse, till at length we were surrounded by an almost impassable bog of mud and water nearly two feet deep. To reach our line, paths were made with old sand-bags and facines, while to get in our rations

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and stores, we adapted an old Belgian tram line, scrounging additional lengths to bring it right up to our stores and cookhouse. Still, in spite of all, we loved our Little Mud Home in the West. All these disadvantages were outweighed by the one important fact, that we were well away from the roads and the paths of the bombers.

During these months the light railways were largely used for evacuating the wounded from the battle zones. The trains drawn by small petrol tractors were run up to meet the stretcher-bearers, who would place their burdens in specially fitted trucks, and so convey them to the nearest field ambulance.

One evening we were proceeding homewards, followed by one of these ambulance trains, when we were both held up by a bad smash in the line in front of us. One word from the M.O., and the whole company, forgetting the fatigue of a long day's work, immediately volunteered to carry the wounded to Solferino F.A., about half-a-mile away. Some of the cases were so serious that at least two died before they reached their journey's end, but the pluck of the others was remarkable. One man, with a leg and an arm shattered, had been lying out in the wet and cold for 48 hours, yet his first and only request was for a "fag." This was at once placed in his mouth and lighted, and when I last saw him he was being borne slowly along smoking serenely. It was a Sunday evening, and a little further down the track we passed a padre administering the Holy Sacrament to a company of men who were going into the trenches that night. With his spotless surplice and white linen altar cloth he provided as great a contrast to the general filth and devastation around as the kneeling men did to those poor fragments of humanity we had just left.

December brought no abatement of the shelling or bombing. We were back once more on the foremost lines, working over the Ridge past Langemarke to the slopes of Poelcapelle. This area was always a very nasty one. From its situation almost touching the Houlthurst Forest, it received its fair share of attention from innumerable batteries that were hidden deep in the recesses of that stronghold; and at odd intervals every day a barrage would fall without any warning on any party who were unfortunate to come under observation.

The 11th, 12th and 13th were especially lively, the Bosche shelling the batteries all around us throughout the day. One party at Oldham had a narrow escape, a shell registering a direct hit on a gunpit alongside where they were working. Two only of the party were slightly wounded; but of the battery two were killed, eight seriously wounded. Two days later the work train, on arriving near the same spot, was greeted with a salvo, one shell landing in the bank a few yards away. All day the Hun kept throwing shells and gas around us, and the men were heartily glad when their return train came to bring them in. But the Bosche must also have seen the train coming up, for when it stopped less than fifty yards away, he dropped several salvos near it, the first so close that the last truck was riddled with splinters. The men were moving towards it at the time, and the first six were thrown violently down and across the track by the force of the explosions. Luckily, apart from a few bruises, no one was really injured; but had the shell landed a few seconds later, after the men had entrained, there would have been a tragedy.

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Despite these untoward happenings, the men were always keen on a bit of sport, and our football team, under the captaincy of Sergeant Ward, were in great evidence. In the immediate vicinity of our camp were two field ambulances, both having soccer teams. Numerous line battalions were camped at different times near us, and at least two other labour companies, all of whom were keen on trying conclusions with our gallant little lads in "royal blue." Two matches a week were generally arranged; one on our ground on the Sunday, our holiday, so that all the men could attend, and the return match during the week. Our record was quite a fine one, considering we took on all comers, our team winning eight out of nine games and scoring 38 goals to our opponents two.

While playing against a Field Ambulance at Canada Farm, four bombing Gothas passed directly over us, and the game was suspended, so that the men should not, by moving about, attract attention.

Christmas day we tried to keep in the good old-fashioned way. Traditional weather prevailed; the ground was deeply covered with snow, and there was a keen frosty air. There was of course no work. All efforts were concentrated on feeding and amusement. At mid-day a substantial meal was served of roast beef and two vegetables, followed by plum puddings and sweet sauce, apples, oranges, etc. Every man also received a pint of beer with his dinner and supper—real English beer, not the Belgian delusion that masquerades under the same name. In the afternoon there was a football match against another labour company, which our team easily won to the great delight of the supporters. Then in the evening a grand concert was given in the "Hippodrome" by the members of the concert party under Lieut. Smith. Quite a feature of the entertainment was the rendering of an original recitation by the M.O., Dr. Douglas Pearson, R.A.M.C. The theme was the Company Football Team, and the poem ran as follows:—

1947.

The old man sat by the bar room fire,
And stared at his empty glass.
He was, I believe, an egregious liar,
And had sized me up as an ass.
"Time was," said he I guiltily started—
And this was the tale he told ere we parted.
I happen to know that most of it's true,
And as he told it to me I'll tell it to you—
It cost me five pints, but what could I do?

"You've 'eard of the war which happened before
You was growed up, I reckon, you and some more."
He began—"Well, I tell 'e, sir, I was out there."
I politely responded—"The devil you were!"
He nodded. "And we was fightin' the Huns,
The O.C. and me and some red-hotted guns.
But what I remember the best of the lot
Is the footer team what my old company'd got.

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A good lot of lads, but, Lord love yer and bless yer,
You 'ad to be smart then to better a Cheshire.
There was old Sergeant Ward—he skippered our crew,
And I reckon 'twas more than one thing that he knew.
There was ' Tiny ' out left, many men gave him best
When he rapped out his ' B——s ' and stuck out his chest.
There was Robinson, too, with an 'ead like macadam ;
An 'ard-'eaded nut was our inside left, Adam.
There was also Jack Tonge, very clever and hot ;
It was Lor' 'elp the goalie when he got in a shot."

He paused for his breath and reached for his glass,
And the film from his eyes like a mist seemed to pass ;
The bent old back straightened, and I saw his eyes gleamed,
Years fell from my back and I thought that it seemed
Only just a short time since that long, long ago,
When he was a Tommy and I his M.O.
And as I remembered, my pulse beating quicker,
Harry Cooper, right back, that extraordinary kicker,
Rashman, Jones, Dodson, Sinclair, Leighton, and Davies,
And Morley, their record the bravest of brave is.
All these I recalled and my old eyes grew dim,
The old man had changed in his place there a slim
And active six men stood drawn up at attention—
Just six who'd received an honourable mention
For valour. My mind then jerked back to the list,
And Riding and Maylor and Hadfield and Phillips
And Meadows and Reekie merged out of the mist—
Of the 58th's men I knew long ago
When they were just Tommies and I their M.O.

. . . . . .

The old man sat at the bar room fire,
And he pitched me a tale of a game—
I fear his memory played him false,
So I won't tell you the same—
But this I know I've thought it since,
And, by God, I thought it then—
'Tis ill to be beggar, 'tis good to be Prince,
'Tis best to have lived with such men.

In addition, songs were rendered by Sergeants Williams, Fallon, and Sheridan, Corporals Clements, Vernon and Brittall, and Privates Thomas, Tonge, Glaister and C. Jones. Two highly comical sketches were given by those versatile artists, Privates Silaborn and Rooney. A repeat performance was given on New Year's Eve, when Colonel J. D. R. Stewart, commanding the Labour Group, and his staff, Acting Adjutant J. W. Thompson, Lieut. and Q.M. A. Gregory and Doctor J. Douglas Pearson, R.A.M.C., were present. At midnight a bell behind the stage struck the hour, and all present sang " Auld Lang Syne." The O.C. proposed a vote of thanks to Colonel Stewart for kindly attending the concert, and also for his many acts of kindness towards

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the company. Colonel Stewart, who was received with prolonged applause, said he had greatly enjoyed the evening and would always remember it and the 58th Company wherever he might be.

The singing of "For he's a jolly good fellow" and three hearty cheers for Colonel Stewart brought the proceedings to a close.

On emerging from the hall we discovered that Jerry had paid us three visits while the show was in progress, and had bombed all around.

A Train of L.R. Material.

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CHAPTER VII.

Morocco Farm Camp.

January—March, 1918.

The year opened with something new in the way of aerial horrors. Early on the morning of January the third Jerry came over at 6-30 a.m., dropped one of his large armour-piercing bombs, evidently aiming for the cross-roads near Burnt Farm. It fell only about twenty yards away and made the largest bomb crater I have ever seen. The diameter was over 60 feet and the depth about 30. Huge square lumps of solid earth several tons in weight were thrown a considerable distance and the adjoining camps were covered with débris. Yet, in spite of all, only one man was killed, but thirteen were wounded more or less severely. Nine horses were cut to pieces, and were buried in the bottom of the crater, looking as one of our officers expressed it, "like tea leaves in the bottom of a cup."

A fortnight later the left half of the company, with Lieutenants Smith and Dunne moved up to Agadir Farm, and went into tents there. These had been pitched by a Canadian company, and had been sunk deep in the ground and well revetted all round for protection against bombs. All was well when they took over; the ground was frozen hard and dry, and snow lay thick and deep over everything. But the very first night a rapid thaw set in, accompanied by a storm of wind and rain, and in a few minutes the camp was inundated with water. Then, to their dismay, it was found that the builders of the camp had not provided for any drainage, and the tents rapidly became baths in which the men's kits and bedding floated around. Of course sleep was impossible, and having nowhere to go, the men walked about all night long in the pouring rain. The officers were in a similar plight, their dugout being one of the first to be flooded.

Next morning disclosed a fearful state of mud and slush, yet despite all these inconveniences, the men fell in, in the semi-darkness, and marched to their daily work, whistling and singing, the favourite tune being "Oh! it's a lovely war." Marching over the bridge across the canal was a dangerous task; the wind was still blowing almost a hurricane and driving deluges of rain down the gulley formed by the banks on either side. It was with the utmost difficulty that the men were able to move across without being blown into the water, and proceed on their five mile march to the Steenbeeck. This was a raging torrent. The light railway bridge had collapsed under the pressure of the flood during the night, carrying with it an engine and several cars of a train which unluckily happened to cross at the crucial moment. These cars were loaded with ammunition for the forward guns, and had an escorting party of a labour company. Several exciting rescues took place in the dark, but all were got out except the engine driver, who was pinned beneath the engine, and whose body was never recovered. For several hours in the rain and mud the party laboured getting out the trucks, but the

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engine was too deeply embedded in the mud, and a steam crane had to be brought up next day. The engine was then lifted out, and the bridge repaired and the line relaid.

The work once again was situated in one of the worst portions of the salient. The district over which we had to maintain the lines lay almost alongside and parallel to the southern edge of the Houlthurst Forest, and not a day passed without numerous places along the line being heavily shelled from the big guns there. Day after day the working parties would return with tales of narrow escapes. One day it would be Admirals Road Spur that would be the object of the Hun's special hate, another day Oldham, Bury, Kitchener's Wood, Corner Cot, Battle Yard, etc.; all round would in turn get their share of the shelling, and the sections responsible for maintenance and repair would have a lively time.

On January 26th the remainder of the company moved forward to Agadir Farm, leaving with the greatest regret the group we had been so long associated with and the comfortable huts we had built. Even our great concert hall, where we had spent so many enjoyable evenings, had to be abandoned. It was a great wrench. We had quite an affection for our camp; it had treated us so well. Despite the month after month of nightly bombing, situated in the middle of our mud patch, we had escaped with only two minor casualties, and we had come to feel absolutely safe there whatever was happening. But greater still we all felt leaving Colonel J. D. R. Stewart and his group, who had for over six months looked after our interests so well, and to whom we were indebted for so many privileges and comforts.

At Agadir Farm we were joined by 2nd Lieut. C. C. Lewis, making up our full complement of officers. A few days after Mr. Lewis was patrolling the line with Sergeant Rafferty, when a shell dropped alongside them, and a splinter struck the latter, piercing through his arm and entering his side. He was immediately sent to hospital, and very shortly reached the soldier's haven, "Blighty," where I believe he still is. It was a great loss to the company. "Raf," as he was affectionately called, was one of the oldest and best of the N.C.O.'s. Fearless in danger, he had a great contempt for Fritz's shelling; his favourite remark when shelling was on being "Fritz never can hit anything." It proved false this time, though.

Near Admirals Road Spur there was a canteen fitted up in the interior of an old German concrete pill box, and run by a padre, where eggs, great luxuries then, could be purchased. One man visited this canteen one morning to buy eggs for his sergeant, but when on his way back to the party, with several in his cap, two huge black shrapnel burst right over him. He dived for the nearest trench, holding aloft above his head with commendable presence of mind his precious burden. After the pieces had ceased falling he resumed his journey, and handed the anxious N.C.O. his eggs without even a single one being cracked ! ! !

This Hun shrapnell was developing into a regular nuisance; one never seemed to be able to get away from it. Sometimes it would burst with a terrific report right over one's head, but more often it would be high up, aimed at one of our observation balloons. In either case the result would be the same—a pattering of fragments all around you like heavy hail falling.

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Our camp used to suffer owing to its being directly in front of a balloon, and several men were hit with dropping pieces. One man had a piece cut right through his steel helmet and then fall gently on his head underneath ! !

Exactly a month after our arrival in Agadir Farm we moved again. Our camp had become exceedingly muddy, wet and unhealthy, so we went forward over the Yser Canal and camped at Morocco Farm. Here we were able to accommodate all the men in Nissen huts, while the officers had small dugouts built of circular corrugated iron, covered over with a layer of earth and sandbags. To our disgust, the balloon section followed and pitched right alongside, with the natural result that we were continually getting showers of scrap iron in all portions of the camp.

In front of my dugout was a pool of water, an offshoot of the big canal, and here lived a couple of water fowl. Our regimental cat one morning lay in wait for these on the edge of the pond, when suddenly overhead came the crack of a bursting shell, followed by the whizz of the falling nose cap. Plump into the water it fell with a screech, sending a huge column of water right over the surprised cat. I don't think that I ever saw a cat jump so quickly or so high, as with an unearthly yell and a tail like a small telegraph pole she disappeared in a distant trench ! ! !

St. David's Day (March 1st) was heralded in by a gas alarm at midnight, followed by a severe air raid and a terrific early morning strafe. Things got more and more lively up the line. Mr. Smith and Sergeant Cookson had a very near escape at Bury, a 9·2 falling alongside the track and covering them with mud, while they crouched in a shell hole.

One evening I went forward with a Standard gauge ballast train. It was night work of necessity, as no train could proceed there by daylight, and had hardly started the job of discharging, when all around, but more particularly to the south of us, there burst out almost simultaneously a most appalling strafe. It seemed as if every gun in the salient was firing at its utmost speed, until the very ground itself was shaking. From the top of the ridge I could see the valley below, one inferno of fire and smoke, with flashes in such quick succession that it was like a continuous flash of lightning running to and fro along the ground. No one knew what was happening. Had the long-expected German Advance started ? was the question on every lip. Next day we heard that 20,000 Bosche had attempted an advance from Polderhock, only to be cut to pieces by our guns, the few survivors who reached our trenches being thrown out by a counter attack early that morning.

Just at this time one of our Dixie Kings had a narrow escape. Returning on the main road about four hundred yards from camp, two shells dropped, one on either side of him, blowing him into one ditch and his dixies into the other. " Zeb " arrived in camp covered with mud and scratches, but luckily with no serious hurt.

We still continued playing football, and had made an excellent ground, right alongside the camp, filling in numerous shell holes and levelling the surface by aid of a scarifier and a field roller. These had been abandoned by the farmers years ago, but with a little repair proved most efficient when drawn by the transport heavies. This ground had only one drawback, it had had formerly been a balloon station, and Fritz still sent occasional shells there.

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Once during an exciting match a shell blew out the corner flag, but the spectators only moved to the opposite side of the ground, and the game never stopped at all. A tournament had been instituted by the Group Colonel, and in the semi-final the visiting outside right was knocked out just before the finish by a shell fragment hitting hisfoot. These little untoward happenings never damped the ardour of the enthusiasts, and the men continued playing until, just before we left, the unsporting Hun planted a line of shell-holes right across the centre of the field, and even these would have been filled in, I believe, if we had not had to retire altogether. The tournament was never finished. Our team went right through to the final, but this was never played. Fritz starting his offensive, scattered the competitors all over France, and put a full stop to the proceedings.

The Hun was now, although we did not know it at the time, busy with his artillery preparations for the big offensive. Right across the salient a strong battle line was being hastily built and heavily fortified. Working in front and all round this, our men came in for a terrific amount of shelling. On March 11th, and 12th they were chased out of Battle Yard, and on the 13th, 14th and 15th were shelled off Admiral's Road Spur. This last portion of line received so much attention from the Bosche—for he plastered it every day as soon as the morning mist cleared off and made observation possible—that we used to send a party up early and withdraw them again before he got busy at about 10 o'clock. Then from March 16th to the 21st, practically the whole line had it, the shelling being especially severe at Romeo-Juliet Farm, Corner Cot, Admiral's Spur, Broad Street, Birmingham, and Stoke. (For the uninitiated I ought to say that many of the stations on the different sections of these lines were called after well known towns at home.

The following day, at Stoke, a shell fell near a party. Pte. Clark was killed instantly and five others badly wounded; one, Pte. Ellis, so severely that he died the same night. At the same time the party at Huddleston Yard failed to get away, and Pte. Hutchinson was badly wounded by a fragment of a shell.

Jerry came over in force on the night of the 24th, and bombed all roads and camps, doing a great amount of damage, especially in the horse lines.

Our camp lay in a direct line from some of his long range batteries to the No. 4 Bridge. These used to fire continually in their efforts to knock this out, and we unfortunately received all the "shorts." For days this went on, the shells just clearing our huts and landing between them and the canal. But on the 28th, one fell shorter than usual and pitched directly into a hut full of men who had only just returned from work. The hut was wrecked, and three men, Ptes. Lye, Miller and Stephenson were killed instantly, and eight others seriously wounded. Of these Pte. Hart died in hospital, Lloyd lost an arm and received several other wounds, while Knight was thrown the length of the hut and lost his speech for several weeks It was a terribly sad misfortune. The following day (Good Friday) we buried our dead in a military cemetery near Ypres. A soldier's funeral with a Protestant and a Roman Catholic chaplain to read the services to the accompaniment of the guns and shells bursting near by.

On Easter Day a great number of the Company attended communion service in the wooden church at Essex Farm. To all of us the service seemed

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more impressive than usual. The solemn phrases of the burial service still sounded in our ears, and each and all of us could not but realise that at any day our call might come.

On Monday a Bosche 'plane flew low over Poperinghe and raked the streets with his machine gun. He paid the penalty though for his temerity, being forced to land between that town and Ypres—the pilot and gunner being taken prisoners before they had an opportunity of damaging their machine.

All through this week the shelling increased. Night and day there was no respite, and the strain on the men was a heavy one, for sleep at night was well nigh impossible, owing to the constant bombing and unending racket of the guns and shells.

On the 9th I had to go to Poperinghe, and accompanied by one of the orderly room staff, jumped a lorry almost opposite our camp, and travelled right through on it. It was a particularly noisy one, and we neither noticed or heard anything, except that the road was very empty and free from traffic. But at Brandhoek we came into a fearful mix up. The road was a shambles, such as I will not try to describe. From a military policeman I ascertained that a brigade of artillery moving out had been caught by Fritz's shell fire, and that the road had been under shell fire all morning ! ! ! And we had come down all the way blissfully unconscious of anything being wrong ! ! !

Arriving in Poperinghe we set about getting through our business as quickly as possible. The shopkeepers were already putting up the shutters and making preparations for flight. As soon as possible we started our return journey, and chose to go out by the Elverdinghe Road and so avoid the station. In this we were lucky, as the station received a terrible strafing just as we were passing it at a distance. Reaching the Switch Road we decided to get back to Ypres Road again and were half way across when we heard a shell travelling overhead. We stopped and listened and heard it explode in the further end of the town. A second followed, landing in the same place. We then decided we would be safe to get away. A third shell passed likewise, but the fourth landed in the road right in front of us, where we should have been had we not stayed to listen ! Deeming discretion the better part we retraced our steps hurriedly and returned to camp via Elverdinghe, giving the Ypres Road a wide berth.

The following night was the worst I think I have ever experienced. Commencing at 10 p.m. and lasting till 6 a.m. the following morning, the Bosche sent a salvo of four shells over regularly every ten minutes. We could hear the report of the guns first and the shriek of the shells almost simultaneously with the explosion as they [illegible] around our huts. Hour after hour, I lay and listened, for sleep was impossible. I could feel the impact of the shells against the ground. [illegible] at 2 a.m. one pitched almost under the end of my hut, when the whole structure seemed to rise in the air and almost tipped me out of my bed. Hastily dressing I went through the inky darkness of the night to the next hut to see how Harvey and Lewis had fared, and found them in much the same [illegible] trying to clear the wreckage of their glass, etc., from the floor. For [illegible] stayed there and talked, longing for day to break, and then [illegible] and with him went round the camp expecting the worst. [illegible] ght not a hut or man had been hit, though there were craters everywhere.

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I had just returned to my hut and laid down again thinking all was over, when at 6 a.m. came another right between my hut and the next, once again sending us up in the air. This was, I am glad to say the last., and I there and then decided to look for some dugouts for the following night in case Fritz repeated the dose. It was lucky I did so, for at 10 p.m. the next evening the show restarted. Orders had already been issued, and down to the dugouts in the canal bank the whole of us, officers, N.C.O.'s and men hustled. At midnight came the order to stand to for a move. We did so, in the dugouts, for we did not feel at all inclined to return to our Nissen huts, for the shelling was a repetition of the previous night's, and it was dangerous to even cross our parade ground at all. A company in the next camp found this out to their cost. Their men were packing up, when a shell crashed right into their hut, killing four and wounding many others.

Several of the men returned to their huts to pack up their valuables, our amateur watch repairer being one of them. He had three watches all dismantled in his hut, and decided to rescue them. A shell coming near him, he jumped in the darkness into a trench and landed up to his waist in ice cold water. Reaching his hut at last, he struck a light and started collecting his treasures. But hearing the shells falling all round he dropped them into a jam pot half full of jam and hastily bundled the lot with his bread, butter, etc., into a sandbag and bolted. Next rest day was spent picking the wheels and pins out of the jam. He succeeded in getting the watches together and going again, but one customer grumbled because the glass was cracked.

One of our officers had the shock of his life that evening. Going along the canal bank in the pitch darkness to visit the dugouts and see that all was well, he was accosted by a man who in very broken English asked his whereabouts. D—— immediately jumped to the conclusion that the Bosche must have broken through, and that there in front of him was one of his scouts!! Arresting him instantly, he discovered he was a Russian who had only recently been attached to our Company.

Morning broke at last, the shelling ceased, and up came the joyful news that we were to pack up and retire from the camp as soon as possible to a site near International Corner. The camp was struck in record time, and by 10 a.m. we left with feelings of devout thankfulness that we had been able to get away unscathed.

Nearly a year afterwards I discovered that on the 9th, 10th, and 11th, the Bosche had launched another big push wth the object of dividing the British Army in two, and reaching the Channel ports. The failure was attributed by him to several of his divisions getting drunk at Givenchy!!! Luckily for us they did, for we should never have been able to extricate ourselves from our very forward position, as his advance lay right across our only line of retreat.

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Sotteghem Station after the Huns' Retreat.

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CHAPTER VIII.

Steenvoorde, Ledringhem, Abeele, Beoschepe.

April—July, 1918.

Our new camp was at Bailey Farm, near International Corner, and within a mile of the woods where we had been located almost a year before. The following day we were issued out with 100 rifles, and had to find men to carry them. This was rather difficult, for as I have previously stated, hardly any of our original battalion had been trained to the use of the rifle. I fell the company in and explained the situation, and was much gratified to find the requisite number come forward at once and volunteer.

We were not destined to remain here long. A balloon section followed us again, and camped in the farm buildings. So we moved on Sunday, the 14th, to a hutted camp that had been built by a Chinese labour company, where we found exceedingly comfortable quarters. Our mess had been built of bricks, made of local clay by the Chinks themselves, and burnt in the sun. The interior doors and fittings were unmistakably made by the same hands—the decorative design being remarkable. But more weird still was the Chinese idea of camouflage. The sheds and shelters and the ammunition dumps around were covered with the strangest designs. Chinese Gods abounded, sitting under mysterious orange trees, whose branches extended straight out from the trunks, holding each a golden orange at its end. Dragons and other fearsome beasts were there in every colour. Suns and moons and a perfect constellation of stars met the eye on every side. The whole effect was a perfect riot of Chinese imagination in colour.

Although we had moved our camp back, our work still lay on the forward lines. The locality remained the same, but our task had altered considerably. Now, instead of laying and maintaining, we were taking up and demolishing, so that the Bosche could not utilise the lines in his expected advance. Two trains in charge of a railway officer used to run up daily with an officer and loading party of our men on each. These would go up as forward as possible and then the party would take up rails and pack the cars with as big a load as the tractors could draw. It was risky work. We had to get up to the furthest portion of the track, far in front of the Army line and right amongst the machine gunners, who in their isolated posts watched for the first signs of the enemy's coming. Then would come the homeward crawl, right out in the open, stopping every five yards to pick up a section of rails. When the cars were all loaded the tractors had not sufficient power to draw their load, except on lowest gear, and the rate of progress would be about two miles an hour. It was impossible to use steamers, for the smoke would have betrayed us at once.

Our aim was always to get loaded and away in the early morning before the sun dispelled the mists which always hung over this marshy ground. But we repeatedly failed in this, our little train would be spotted, and the

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loading finished under shell fire. How we all used to bless those tractors crawling along, chased by Fritz's shells. I think he used to watch us passing some prominent feature and then give us a furious reception as we passed. Frequently he beat us for pace and would blow up the track in front, necessitating a halt until the broken section had been taken out and a new one from the leading car bolted in its place. One sergeant reported four of these "punctures," as he laughingly called them, on his return journey one day.

Our last day's journey was on May 6th, when a party went up to Bochcastle, a place situated, according to the maps that had for days previously been printed in our daily papers, at least four miles in front of our front line. The previous day we had salved a huge 8 inch howitzer, lying on Pilkem Ridge, abandoned in the mud by its crew. It had been too heavy to move, but Sergeant "Clem" had a brilliant idea. He excavated under it, laid his rails and ran a flat car right underneath the gun carriage, wedged it up and drew it out triumphantly. While the platoons alternately worked this forward area, the remainder continued on maintenance right back to the terminus at Crombeke. Here Lieut. Smith was arrested as a German Spy. We were the only British troops in the locality, and Lieut. Dunne and I visited the local Whiteleys and purchased some picture postcards. Smith followed suit the next day, but on emerging from the shop, he was confronted by a Staff Officer from G.H.Q. who drew him aside, and made him produce his *bona-fides*. It was a long time before Schmidt, the Spy, was allowed to forget this incident.

General "Wind Up" seemed to be prevalent everywhere. This was not lessened by the terrific strafes which took place every night. We were only two miles from Poperinghe and could hear the shells wrecking the town. Kemmel, the scene at this time of such fierce fighting, was not far away, and from our camp we could hear the racket of the guns and shells, when first one side and then the other attempted to capture the hill. On the nights of April 24th and 28th, so terrific was the bombardment there, that though we were some miles away, sleep was impossible. The whole ground and air seemed to vibrate, and the iron roofs of our huts kept up a continuous jangle all night through. Air raids too, made our nights unpleasant here again. We were once more in the centre of several positions of military importance. South of us lay the old railhead of International Corner. East and north were the ammunition dumps, and west of us was Corps headquarters. All of these in their turn were bombed by Jerry's airmen. Every evening the throb, throb of the Gothas used to echo along the corrugated iron huts, while the crash of the bombs only a few hundred yards away shook them till they seemed almost to fall to pieces.

On several occasions the 'planes passed to and fro over our camp so low that they barely seemed to clear the trees. One night Lieut. Dunne vowed a 'plane ran along the top of his hut and knocked his stove pipe down. Next day he took us out and showed the broken pipe as evidence ! ! !

We lived in hourly expectation of a sudden order for our retirement. Everything was prepared. All clothing and stores were cut down to a minimum. What could not be carried away with our limited transport was prepared for either dumping or destroying. We calculated that our first

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platoon would be despatched inside fifteen minutes after receiving the order. Our G.S. wagon carried the cooking utensils and rations. The horses' fodder went on a crib fitted on to the water cart, and the officers' kits, orderly room boxes and medical stores were packed into a trench cart which I had salved and fitted with a limber pole to trail behind the water cart.

Luckily for us the Bosche never succeeded in pushing his advance further, and we were spared the experience of a forced retreat. On May the 8th, we moved to near Proven, and three days afterwards to Wattou, where for a fortnight we were busily engaged building light railways for the French army on the western side of the famous Mount de Cats.

At midnight on the 16th, during one of the nightly air raids, our officers' mess cook, Pte. Ryan, was hit in the leg by a machine gun bullet as he lay in his tent. He left us rejoicing in a "cushy Blighty," but I have since heard with great regret that he has been lamed for life.

Steenvoorde, about two miles south of our camp, was heavily bombed and shelled daily, and most of the inhabitants had left or were leaving; but Wattou, a mile north, had fared better. Shops were still doing a great trade, and there was an excellent officers' restaurant kept by Mlle. Marie, who pluckily remained through all the bombardments, and was still at her post when the Bosche retreated in September.

We were in the French area and played several games of soccer with the French troops around us. They had not a great idea of the science of the game, but had unlimited energy, often wrongly directed, and were great conversationalists. They were however, excellent losers, with a great desire to learn. After the match we entertained the teams in our canteen, where I believe our captain had to submit to a most affectionate kissing before the visitors departed.

On May 26th, 1918, exactly two years since we left our home camp at Chadderton, we moved to Ledringhem. These two years had been spent continuously in the forward area, and except in March 1917, when the Bosche retired on the Somme, so fast that we could not follow him, during the whole period we had never either worked or lived out of the reach of the German field guns. We were heartily glad of a chance to escape from it all for a time; the strain had really been an exceedingly heavy one. Our battle casualties were nearly a hundred, and a large number had returned to U.K. suffering from illness. Yet despite all, I never had a single case of malingering or reporting sick without a cause. The men worked well and cheerfully, and were always ready to volunteer for dangerous work. It was astounding to find a party after being pounded by enemy shell fire and barely escaping with their lives, laughing heartily at their experiences and chipping each other over who had run the quickest; yet this was not an exception, but the general rule.

To reach Ledringhem we had to march a distance of twelve miles. Our baggage lorries arrived at 8 a.m., and by 9 a.m. we had packed up and were on the move. The weather was hot and the main roads dry and dusty. I therefore decided to take a direct line to our destination by the numerous country roads and tracks, to avoid the pavé, so tiring to march on, and the heavy motor traffic. Taking our time, for the packs were heavy, we passed

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through Winnezeele and Oudezeele and reached Wormhout shortly before noon. Here we halted for lunch and such refreshment as the village could supply, finally completing our journey before 3 p.m.

Our site was an ideal one, a huge square field of the greenest grass, surrounded by a double row of tall trees, with the red tiled old fashioned farm set in the centre. Can anyone imagine how we appreciated it after twelve months' existence in the desolation of the salient. Our lines extended over two sides of the field, the other two being similarly occupied by No. 4 company of the 8th Canadian railway troops, with whom we were to work. Hidden in these trees we were screened from observation from hostile aircraft and consequently safe from bombing. Every fine night we could hear the Gothas passing overhead. All around from Bergues, Hazebrouck, Cassell and even from Dunkirk and St. Omer we could see the huge beams of the searchlights illuminating the sky, and could hear the firing of the Archies, and louder still the crash of the falling bombs, but only one bomb fell near our camp.

The work we were engaged on was hard. We were working against time laying railways far back to rearmost dumps, but the surroundings were so enjoyable that all of us brightened up again with surprising speed.

Ledringhem, the first and only French village we stayed near, was small, it was true, but near by were Wormhoudt and Arneke, both possessing cafés and estaminets for officers and men. The former place also boasted a cinema. For a month we enjoyed ourselves thoroughly in this peaceful country, spending our evenings playing cricket and football (for there is no close time in the army), and paying visits to all places and objects of interest round about.

We were also initiated into the mysteries of the Canadian base ball game. I cannot say I was greatly impressed, though much amused at the conduct of the crowd, who kept up a continual barracking all through the game. The object was to " ball " the player and " get his goat," which being interpreted means to annoy the man and put him off his game. It was all done in the best of humour, but was very different from our ideas of sport.

On June 25th, Lieuts. Harvey and Lewis, with the right half of the Company proceeded to a camp near Abeele. The journey was made over the light railway we had laid through Steenvoorde and Goedwarsvelde, at the foot of the Mount de Cats and east of the standard guage main line to Poperinghe. This main line had not been used for traffic since the big push in March, owing to its proximity to the Bosche front line. The station buildings had all been destroyed by his shell fire, which still continued at intervals, as a hint, I suppose, not to resume traffic.

Passing around the big curve east of Goed, we had an excellent view of the remains of the famous monastery where a nephew of the Kaiser is reported to be buried in a grave known only to the prior himself. The roof was a skeleton, and one of the minarets had been blown off, yet day after day the Hun sent crowds of shells into the ruins for no apparent reason. Several times later on we tried to get up the hill and inspect the place, but were always prevented by the constant shelling.

The detachment was engaged with No. 1 Company, 8th C.R.T., constructing a new line from Abeele past Boeschepe to near Reninghelst. It was not a nice place. On the eastern side of the hills lay Locre and the

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German position, while his balloons looked right down on the working parties. In addition there was always a struggle going on for Kemmel Hill, and especially at night the fun would be fast and furious.

The first few nights all went well. The officers were comfortably quartered in huts in an old machine gunners' camp, and the men in a big barn close by. Then a big railway gun took up its position right in front and commenced firing. The very next night, about 9 30 p.m., as soon as the gun fired the first shot, there came a storm of H.E. all around the billet. Fortunately the barn had as a foundation a brick wall all round three feet high. This proved an effectual protection for the men lying flat on their beds, but above this level they could hear the pieces of shell crashing through the timber sides and whizzing across. A tin cup hanging over one man's head was perforated by a splinter which passed right through and lodged in the wall behind. The owner now cherishes this as a souvenir. To add to the discomfort the continued explosions loosened the roof tiles, and these commenced falling on the unfortunates below. Two hours later came another spasm. The men could stand it no longer, they crawled out, and Lieut. Harvey and his N.C.O.'s spent the rest of the night getting them away into some neighbouring trenches. The following day they moved camp and pitched their tents on the western side of the main road. But their luck was evidently out. Next morning the Hun started shelling the roads all around, and just as the men were drawing their evening meal, twelve inch shells began falling close to them. All night long he strafed the road from Poperinghe to Abeele with heavy stuff, perforating several of the tents, and once more the men were obliged to leave their camp and spend the night in trenches. Next morning camp was again moved to a spot remote from railways and main roads.

A few days after, the Canadians were working their mule teams and skips on the grade, when they were shelled heavily and suffered some casualties. They attempted to return a short while after, but were again driven off, and our men had to complete the work with shovels.

At this time the Bosche was daily reported to be preparing for a big push in this sector. A large qunatity of valuable joists and rails lay beyond Ouderdom at Zevecoten dump. Sergeant Ward took a party of fifteen men every day from July 14th to the 18th, to salve these and prevent them falling into enemy hands. The route lay first past our 6in. batteries and then beyond the field guns right up to the second line trenches, held by the Essex Regiment at the foot of Kemmel Hill. All the way the train was heavily shelled, especially when passing close to the batteries. At times the driver had to wait till a salvo had fallen and then dash through at express speed. Seven and eight times a day the track would be blown up and the trains stopped while new lenghts were put in. The dump itself was under direct observation, and one morning fourteen Bosche balloons could be seen in line close in front. In spite of the shelling which the party were subjected to every time their train arrived, ten trains of six wagons each were loaded and brought out safely.

On the 17th, the party were held up for nearly an hour by a continuous barrage of H.E.'s, one man being badly wounded as they crouched in shell-holes—the only cover available. The remainder managed to get the train

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completed and out, but were unable to return to where they had left their coats, and although some had money and other valuables they had to be left behind. However, when the party arrived next morning, the coats were still there untouched. Evidently no one else cared to visit the place.

It was undoubtedly owing to skilful leading that the casualties were so slight, and for his resource and courage, Sergeant Ward was deservedly awarded the Military Medal.

On July 21st, Lieut. Harvey and 100 men moved back to Beauvorde, where they were joined the following Sunday by Lieut. Dunne and the remainder of the detachment.

A week after the half companies changed over, the right half returned to Ledringhem, and Lieut. Smith and the left half replaced them at Beauvorde.

August the 6th was a day of great excitement. The King paid a visit to the area, calling at corps headquarters at Winnezeele on his way. At Wattou he attended a review and presented several V.C.'s and other medals, and then journeyed along our railway to Wagonbrugge. Lieut. Smith and his gallant troops lined the track, but just as the King's car passed, three Bosche shells passed right over and pitched only a hundred yards away. One of our N.C.O.'s never saw His Majesty at all, diving into the ditch at the sound of the shells, and being lost to view until long after the train had passed.

The detachment was attached to No. 2 Company, 8th C.R.T., and had charge of the maintenance of all the lines forward of Steenvoorde, including those they had laid at Boeschepe. With the lines from Steenvoorde to the railhead at Esquelbecq, the company worked over nearly fifty miles of line. Fortunately all was fairly quiet. The parties at Abeele and Caestre had some lively times, but they were able to return to camp each evening before the worst of the shelling began. Only once was their camp shelled. On Friday, August 16th, the men had returned from work; some were playing cards under a tree, some bathing in the stream at the foot of the hill and others scattered all around, when slap in the middle of all came a shell. By a miracle it missed every group of men, but fell amongst some cattle, killing a cow and severely wounding two others.

The roads at this time were full of American troops, marching up to their sector near Kemmel. Their headquarters were at Ouderzeele, close to our railway. Daily we used to see companies of all descriptions training hard to perfect themselves in modern warfare. Several divisions in succession camped in our field at Ledringhem, using their portable bivvies. The officers used to wander into our mess for a smoke and a chat, discussing the war from every aspect. All seemed extremely keen, and wondered how their men would feel when "going over the top," but few seemed to realise the terrific strain that modern shelling would enforce on them all.

These were extremely busy months for us. New lines, spurs and sidings were required daily, the maintenance of the track under heavy traffic of nearly 2,000 tons a day was no light matter. Small parties under an N.C.O. or experienced private were placed along the whole length between the controls, as the stations were called, and supervising the lot was no easy job.

The controls all bore distinctive names, but the palm must be granted to the sapper who, stationed beyond Winnezeele and Ouderzeele, labelled his tin shack "Dri-az eele."

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Our Concert Party.

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CHAPTER IX.

Meteren, Hell Fire Corner, Zonnebeke, Neuve Eglise.

August—September, 1918.

Sunday, September 1st, brought us news of the Bosche's retirement. I visited Beauvorde the following day and found all excitement. No. 2 Company, 8th C.R.T., were to move forward at once, and my detachment was warned to be ready to move to Caestre to relay the line through Bailleul, in pursuit of the fleeing Hun. With Major Trainer I first visited Caestre, and then proceeded by car through Fletre and Meteren to Bailleul. Between the two first-named villages the road had been blown up in three places to stop the Bosche advance months before, and the holes were then being filled up with broken brick from the shell-stricken houses, to enable traffic to proceed. Meteren was quite the most devastated village I have ever seen. Both sides had shelled it so fiercely that not a single building was left standing; in fact I do not remember seeing any piece of wall more than a few feet high. Passing along it had the appearance of the waste tip of a brick works; great piles of broken brick lying each side of the road, while in the centre a huge pile of similar debris shewed where the church tower had once stood.

Leaving the car, we walked back along the old railway line which was to be made good. It had evidently been used as a cart road and was pitted with shell holes throughout its whole length. On either side lay a number of dead, wrecked guns and trench motars, rifles and shell helmets by the score, with piles of ammunition all abandoned by the Hun in his hurried flight. It was here that the great German push for Hazebrouck was stopped, and it had been the scene of some of the bitterest fighting of the war. In one corner of a field near Meteren I found the rifles of four of our men surrounded by the remains of at least fourteen Bosches. One could easily imagine what a fight to a finish had taken place. Our four heroes had been taken away, but the enemy still polluted the air. Returning to Caestre, Major Trainer very kindly sent me home in his car. Our road lay through Cassell, that peculiar town built on the top of one of the few hills in the neighbourhood, and from which there is a glorious view of the country for miles around. I could clearly see the stacks of Dunkerque and beyond them the blue water of the Channel. It was a great change from the scene of filth and desolation I had just left.

On September 25th, the half company at Ledringhem moved up by light railway to Meteren. The line from Caestre on, had only been just completed, very little of it had been ballasted, most being laid only on the earth grade. Over this, our train lurched and rolled in a most alarming manner, and it was a marvel we did not capsize at times. The engine driver was a great character, When his engine tilted up so that it was impossible to remain on the footplate without holding on, and one had great visions of going right over into the ditch at the side he would only calmly remark "It's quite alright, sir, she'll come back," and she did!!! It was really wonderful how these heavy engines, for they weighed twelve tons, kept the track with its 24inch gauge.

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We pitched our tents alongside the line, south of the remains of the village, with a thick revetment round each as a safeguard against bombs. One section that night complained of a ridge across the tent, and next morning took their shovels to level the floor. To their disgust they discovered they had been sleeping over a dead Bosche, covered only with a few inches of soil. That tent was speedily moved ! ! !

During the night a number of shells dropped between us and the main road, but did no damage, only worried us a lot. It is strange how shelling always affects one in a strange camp, for no one knows at first what the objective is. Then when you get familiar with your surroundings, you wake up, listen to the crump, crump all around you, and say, " There's one for the dump," or " That's another for the cross roads," then turn round and go to sleep in peace again.

Next morning we started on our task of ballasting the line we had travelled over, and thence to Bailleul. Material for ballast was difficult to obtain, so we ran a spur into the village and loaded and carried out with our trains the broken bricks from the ruined church tower.

I wish I could include a picture of the town as it now stands, but even this would not give an adequate representation, for the simple reason that there is nothing left to photograph. The whole is completely demolished and is merely a heap of brick and stone, amongst which is still visible furniture, clothing and even two motor cars lying smashed beneath the fallen roofs and walls. Bailleul was not quite as bad ; there were still houses standing in some of the streets, though not one possessed a roof, and all had been more or less shattered. The buildings surrounding the square, including the Faucon Hotel, which I had visited in 1916 had been razed to the ground. I believe most of it was done by our own guns. By a most extraordinary coincidence, one of the Canadian N.C.O.'s recognised amongst a party of Bosche prisoners working near the station a German who had been his partner in Canada. In Spring of 1914 he had returned to visit his parents in Germany, and when war broke out was unable to get away, but was mobilised in the German army. He had been taken prisoner shortly after their last advance through Bailleul, and gave this sensational account of his experiences there. His division was massing in the square ready to deploy into the open ground beyond, when the combined Allied artillery hurled a hurricane of shell right amongst them. Hemmed in by a barrage of shell in front of them, and by the hordes that were rushed into the town in rear of them, there was no escape. In four hours upwards of 5,000 men were killed in the square alone, while next day five train loads of dead were taken away from the surrounding parts of the town.

The end no doubt justified the means, for the advance was stopped, but Bailleul to-day is a tragedy of wreckage.

At midnight on September 30th came orders to move again. The detachment at Caestre was to join us, and together we were to report to the R.T.O. at Bailleul by 9 a.m. on October 1st. Everything went wrong ; the lorry detailed to convey our stores, etc., broke down under its first load, and refused to move for the remainder of the day. Then the detachments train ran off the line and did not reach us until 11 a.m. Of course we missed the

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train at Bailleul, for we did not arrive there until midday. We dumped our baggage by the road side and proceeded to wait and see what would happen. After repeated 'phonings to Corps, at 3 p.m., an old friend, Captain Price, formerly our adjutant and now staff captain at Corps, arrived, bringing twenty motor lorries in his train. In these we quickly packed our kits and off we went along the same road we had travelled in June, 1916, under very different conditions. Then all the villages and wayside houses were thronged with people making a small fortune out of " Tommy Atkins " as he trudged along or was billeted amongst them. Now not a building remained and not a single soul was visible. Mile after mile disclosed the same monotonous spectacle of ruined houses, tortured trees and fields. One wood I particularly noticed, for we had rested there on our former march, screened from the sun. It had ceased to exist, only a few shattered trunks shewing where it had once been.

We passed through Ypres looking more and more desolate in the fading light, and arrived at our destination soon after 6 o'cloack. The site selected did not sound at all promising, " Hell Fire Corner, on the famous Menin Road." Only two days ago the Bosche had been here looking down on Ypres, the city he had made so many desperate attempts to take, but had never succeeded. Soon everything was stir and bustle, tents had to be pitched and cookhouses, etc., erected, all in the fast fading daylight, for no lights could be shown after dark. We got in somehow amidst the shell holes, and had just snatched a hasty meal, when off went three whistle blasts, followed by the cry " Lights out." We could hear the throb, throb of Jerry's 'planes coming nearer and nearer as he came towards us, while bursts of flame and loud reports along the Menin Road shewed where his bombs were dropping. Luckily he turned north before reaching us, but the remainder of the night, and in fact every night while we camped here, we could hear at intervals the crash of his bombs around us, and the whine of his shells passing over us into the city beyond.

The following morning, we left a party to move the camp up the hill, for I did not at all fancy our present spot. It was wedged in between the cross roads and the railway, and formed a far too attractive target to be comfortable. The remainder of the company commenced work reforming the grade of the standard gauge railway to Roulers. This was in an appaling condition, the cuttings full of shell holes and mud, and the embankments west of Devil's Crossing eaten away by mines and craters. It was a " rush job," and thousands of men were sent up, but I have no hesitation in saying that quite half the work was accomplished by our company, for they alone seemed to have any knowledge of the work.

Zonnebeke station was lost to sight in a marsh, but after dralning the water off and excavating, we at length discovered the old cinder ballast track, and clearing all the mud and debris off the surface left quite a neat job.

Further east the grade improved until after passing Passchendaele we found the Bosche had merely taken away the rails and sleepers, and that the rest of the track was untouched.

For eight days we trudged to and fro in the wet to our job, working twelve hours a day, most of which was in mud and water over a foot deep, a state of things which the continual rain did not improve.

On the night of the 6th we had a very unpleasant time. As usual Jerry

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came over after dark, but instead of passing along, he circled round and round for some hours. Then he began dropping his parachute lights, whose glare lit up the country for miles and made our camp stand out in bold relief. A battery had moved in that day to the next field, and the horse lines were situated on the crest of the slope, immediately above our officers' lines at the top of the camp. Jerry must have seen these, for he turned and came straight towards us. We heard the swish of the falling bomb, and then the burst shook the walls of our canvas huts till every bit of glass on the shelves fell to the floor with a crash (every bit with the exception of our one bottle of whisky, which survived). Then came the whizz of innumerable fragments. One went right through the hut occupied by Lieuts. Harvey and Lewis, passing over them while they lay in bed. Luckily he did not drop a second, for we were in a direct line. Next morning we found he had killed twenty four horses within a few score yards of us, one complete horse line being wiped out.

We were far from sorry when on the following Tuesday we marched out to Ypres station and entrained there for Steenwercke. It was not very far away, but it was midnight before we reached Bailleul. Here we were met by Major Trainer of the 8th C.R.T., who had, with his usual forethought and consideration, brought his two light railway trains to meet us, and so saved us a six mile march in the dark.

We camped near Neuve Eglise and worked on the lines leading into Ploegsteert Woods. The wood was infested with Hun snipers, and both rifles and machine guns could be heard popping off all through the day. One Canadian wandered off from his party, and had not returned when we left a week later. Several others of his company were badly gassed while working in the western portion, and one of our parties had a near squeak, a "dud" falling right amongst them. That week end we had some heavy shelling all round the camp, especially at night. Fritz was particularly severe on the bridges over the Lys, strafing them unmercifully. On Monday, the 10th, I had occasion to visit a camp on the western outskirts of Armentieres. I intended going through the town sight seeing, but the eastern end was being so heavily shelled that I thought better of it.

Wednesday brought with it the reason for this continuous shelling. The Hun had retired during the night ! ! ! Through the wood our train cautiously wended its way past trenches and gun emplacements right up to the canal, where the first check was encountered. The Hun had evidently retired so precipitately that he had had no time to blow up the railway, but all the bridges had been destroyed, and we were rather doubtful whether the line had been mined or not. Leaving our train we crossed into Deulemont by a temporary foot bridge built by the R.E.'s, and walked up the Comines Road for some distance. Everyone we met had the same question : " How far had the Bosche gone back ?" An artillery officer informed us that his battery had reached a point some miles east of Lille without meeting any opposition. The wildest rumours were in the air, but no one knew definitely what had happened. As we returned that afternoon to camp, we found the roads packed with transport. Everyone was moving forward in pursuit.

Major Trainer and I had arranged to go forward in the box car the following day to inspect the line, and unofficially to pay a visit to Lille. But at midnight once again came moving orders which wiped that nice little plan out.

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LIZZIE AND HER ADMIRERS.

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CHAPTER X.

Beythem, Courtrai and Sotteghem.

October—December 1918.

At 9 a.m. on October 18th we entrained on two light railway trains and started on our long journey to the salient once more. Our route lay for some distance along the lines we had laid and maintained through Bailleul, Caestre, Abeele to Poperinghe, and then past Ypres, and over the Passchendaele Ridge to Beythem. The last part of the journey lay through some of the most desolate and mutilated country one could imagine, and we were still travelling through it when darkness fell. We arrived at our new camp site at 7 o'clock, after a ten hours' journey packed tightly in open trucks. By the aid of the moon we pitched our tents alongside the line and settled down.

Shortly after midnight, I was awakened by the sergeant of the guard with the sad news that my C.S.M. had been killed on the railway near the camp. He had left the train at Bailleul and was proceeding by road to join us. Reaching Beythem, he had accepted a lift in a light railway train from the main road to our camp, but at the first points the truck jumped the rails and threw him under the tractor, killing him instantly.

It was a great shock to us all. Sergeant-major Baker was an old veteran, the wearer of a long row of ribbons, who had by his courtesy, tact and consideration, endeared himself to everyone. We buried him the next day in a soldier's plot in Beythem cemetery, amidst unusual regret that so gallant and honourable career should be terminated in such a terrible fashion.

Adjoining our camp was a large Bosche dump, crowded with all kinds of R.E. stores. I think nearly every man had a stove and piping for his tent out before someone mounted a guard there. Here I saw for the first time the Hun tanks built of wood, painted to imitate the real article and mounted on rollers for moving along. From a very few yards away it was quite impossible to detect the fraud, and no doubt they had succeeded in their object, which was obviously an attempt to put the " wind up " our troops.

Passchendaele station, on Monday, October 21st, was one of the saddest sights imaginable. The roads were thronged with refugees, mostly without boots, without hats and in some cases almost without clothes, having only a few rags for a covering, plodding wearily along. They had been driven out of their homes by the retiring Huns, and forced to march along the roads to impede the British advance. The Hun well knew that our gunners would not fire, but had no such compunction himself, and nearly every one of the unfortunates had been hit by fragments of shells. Old men, women and children of all ages were to be seen weakened by hunger and loss of blood, resting by the roadside, unable from sheer exhaustion to proceed further. Then to their aid would come parties of our warm-hearted boys in khaki, who would gather up the children in their arms and carry them, while others assisted the parents to reach the station, where a train was waiting to take them to safety.

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These poor villagers at first could hardly believe their eyes. During his retreat the Hun had filled their ears with warning against the ferocious English and especially Colonial soldiers, and their gratitude was pathetic to witness. We noticed the same thing all along our line. At first the inevitable small boys would hang round at a distance, watching us, but very soon they saw we were harmless, and soon made friends with the men, whose bully beef and biscuits were willngly shared amongst them. After a day or two we could hardly keep them off our train. They were having the time of their lives, joy-riding up and down.

The following day we started another "rush job." The Bosche had retreated to the Scheldt, and rumour had it that he was contemplating a counter-attack. Owing to the weather observation was impossible, and Corps were anxious to get ammunition up to the forward batteries. The roads were practically useless, and the standard gauge railway had not only every bridge and culvert blown up, but every joint as well. There remained only the metre gauge which had not been much damaged, probably because the Bosche had used it in his retirement and also because he had taken with him all the rolling stock, and knew that we had none to suit. It was decided to take up some six miles of this and relay it to our 60 centimetre gauge right up to the guns. The L.R.C.E. had estimated to Corps that it would take three days to complete, but told us privately that we ought to get through with a hustle in two ; in which case we were to have the third day for a holiday.

I told the men, and the following day we got such a hustle on that before midday I had visions of completing our portion before night. But just before lunch time, the German guns opened out and gave the top of the line a strafing. We decided to knock off for lunch, hoping he would either get over his fit of temper or alter his range. He did the latter and pounded away at the village and cross-roads on either side of us all afternoon, driving the villagers out in crowds. Still thinking of our holiday, and hoping to make it two days, we went on with a rush and finished just as night was falling. I believe we broke all records, and, more important still, gained a well deserved holiday. I spent the next day visiting Roulers and Iseghem. The former was badly knocked about, especially near the station, but the latter had hardly been touched. I bought some local views in a small shop kept by a lady who spoke English quite well, although, as she said, out of practice after four years of German occupation. Here I was again told how the Bosche had tried to prejudice the townspeople against the English by tales of how they would be ill-treated and robbed of all they possessed. Walking along, I was the object of great curiosity. I must have been one of the first English officers to be seen, for I could hear the remark "Officier Anglais" from nearly every group as I passed along.

I soon, however, had to take a back seat, three gallant Scotties in all their glory with swinging kilts came sauntering up the street. Very few seemed to know who they were, and from every window could be seen one or more female heads gazing at the curious sight. I believe many thought they belonged to the "Women's Army Corps" ! ! !

Friday, October 25th, saw us on the move again. At 10-30, after all the men had gone out to work came orders to move at once to Courtrai.

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Fortunately I was at group headquarters when the wire arrived, and was able to get round in the car and recall the men. This took some time, and it was 5 p.m. before we had finished loading our transport lorries and had entrained. Major Cosgrove had kindly lent us a train to take us as near our destination as the light railway could. This proved to be Lenderlede, and at 7 p.m. we left that station and started our seven mile march. The night was pitch dark, and the road strange. I repeatedly had to use my electric torch to see whether I was on the road or not. The surface too was not of the best, and men repeatedly had to be assisted out of shell-holes and ditches into which they had slipped. We reached Courtrai soon after 9 p.m. and found the town in darkness. There had been an air raid that evening, and the streets were absolutely deserted. Our billets were reported to be near the station, and thither we wended our way, only to find the bridges over the Lys all blown up. Luckily we discovered a military policeman, an ex-detective from San Francisco, and guided by him we retraced our steps and then went by dubious paths to where we were told lay a footbridge. This consisted of a narrow floating duck-walk, with a rope for hand-rail, and with a short steps or ladder at each end leading up from the water level to the wharf above. Down these we clambered in single file by the light of an electric torch, and up the other side by aid of a candle. It was slow progress, the bridge would only hold three at a time, and the men encumbered by their packs and tired by the march after their day's work, were not in the best of form for tight-rope walking in the dark. I quite expected to hear a splash and to find someone had overbalanced or taken the wrong turning, but nothing happened—all got safely across, only to find a second and similar bridge a few hundred yards further on.

Once across this and in the town, I went to the town major's office to get the location of our billets. The clerk did not know the numbers, but showed me the position on his map. Down we went and found nothing. The spot pointed out lay in the centre of the station yard with nothing like a building of any sort remaining there. I again visited the town hall, but could get no further information, so finding a building near by being prepared for an R E. company, I walked in and commandeered it for the night. Returning to where I had left the men, I found them gathered round having a sing-song, the particular tune being again, "Oh! it's a lovely war." The next question was food. This was on the transport lorries, and of course they could not be found. We searched the station where they had been ordered to report with no result, so turned in at midnight supperless to bed.

Early next morning Lieut. Dunne, who was in charge of the transport, arrived and told us that the lorries had failed to get across the river and had dumped the baggage the other side, leaving him and his loading parry to sit on it and guard it through the night. A ration party was at once organised We soon had our fires going, and, after a much needed breakfast, moved into our allotted billets.

The following day we commenced the task of rebuilding the railway bridges over the Lys and the necessary diversion of the line on either side. We worked in two shifts from light to dark. The second shift had the worst of it; scarcely an evening did they get their dinner in peace after returning.

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As soon as darkness set in, over would come Jerry dropping his bombs around. On the 28th he visited us at 6 p.m. and again at 9 p.m. The following night he came over four times, at 6 p.m., 9 p.m., 11 p.m., and again at 2 o'clock in the morning; but the worst raid of all was that of the 31st, when he kept up a raid for five hours, finishing by dropping a bomb right in front of our billets and blowing in all the front windows.

West of the town there were several chimney stacks belonging to what had once been textile factories, built of red brick, circular in plan and about 200 feet high. A shell of ours had hit one of these about half way up its height, but instead of demolishing it as might be expected, it had passed right through, in at one side and out at the other, leaving a hole large enough for a man to crawl through, but doing no other damage.

During this week the Corps Commander made his official entry into Courtrai and was given a civic welcome in the ancient Stad-haus. The large square in the centre of the town was thronged on this and every day by a crowd of holiday makers rejoicing in their freedom, listening to the bands of numerous regiments quartered around. Here again the Scotties with their kilted pipers were the observed of all observers.

Leaving the square with its air of hilarity and joyfulness I encountered one of those vivid contrasts so peculiar to this war. Within a few hundred yards there were several ambulances and motor lorries bringing to the hospital, from the villages near the Scheldt, patients of all ages suffering from gas poisoning. These unfortunate peasants had taken refuge in the cellars of their houses during the bombardments, seeking safety from the shells and falling debris. But the Hun, with his usual disregard for the lives of civilians, having to cover his retreat, flooded the place with gas, which working always downwards had caught the refugees in a deadly trap.

It was pitiful to see the agonised contortions of all, especially the little children, as they were carried, gasping and writhing, by willing hands into the old convent buildings. I wished that the pacifists at home, who are always talking of the gentle Hun, could have been with me that day.

It was good to hear on all sides the great admiration everyone had for the British. My landlord, for I occupied practically the only inhabitated house in the street, told me in English, which he spoke remarkably well, that he had never doubted that we would win in the end. He said that during the big German push in the spring, the German commandant had boasted to the burgomaster that the British were being driven headlong to the sea, and that soon England would be on her knees sueing for peace. The gallant burgomaster's reply was characteristic of the opinion of all. "Never while there are two or three Britishers left to carry on."

On November 5th three platoons moved to Vichte, on the line to Audenarde, leaving Lieut. Dunne and one platoon behind. The work was still reforming and regrading the railway line, filling up the numerous shell and mine holes which abounded in the track. The following Sunday evening, news came through that the armistice had been signed. Searchlights flashed, Very lights of all colours made a great display, and bon fires could be seen all around. At Courtrai there were great scenes, all the Hun notice boards and signs, in fact everything savouring of the Hun was pulled down and burned

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in huge bonfires around which the Staff, with townspeople and soldiers, danced, sang and cheered for hours. Luckily there was no sign of Jerry that night, for as every one knows the armistice was not signed until twelve hours later.

In compliance with the terms, the Germans a day or two after sent a very elaborate plan, showing how the railways, etc., had been mined. It was really a work of art, every different class of mine being shown by small shells in different colours at the exact points along the line where they had been laid, and in the margin was the key plate with the size and timing of each. It was then found that the Company had been working over some dozens of these for the last fortnight, and that one large mine was due to go up the following day. Truly they had particular reasons for being thankful for the armistice.

Vichte was at this time the railhead, and for several days the station was thronged with released British prisoners, who arrived at all hours, both on foot and in motor lorries. Many and terrible were the tales they told of the treatment received from the Huns, for most of them were forced to work immediately in the rear of his lines. Their appearance fully corroborated their stories, for they were pale, thin and emaciated, and clothed literally in rags. Many had on discarded Bosche uniforms, and were wooden sabots on their feet. Until proper arrangements were made, all the units in the neighbourhood joined together to provide them with food, especially soup and tea, sufficient to sustain them on their short rail journey to Courtrai, where every comfort awaited them.

Although hostilities had ceased, our work still continued, the Hun had made a fearful mess of the main lines, blowing out the joint of each rail length for over twenty miles. Every bridge and culvert had been also blown up, and at regular intervals there were huge mine craters, especially in the embankments. The big railway junction at Sotteghem had suffered badly, and here we were sent on November 21st to put things right. Our exact location was Audenhove St. Goorix, as it was more central for the work. We left Vichte in twenty motor buses and travelled along the valley of the Scheldt, crossing by several temporary bridges which seemed none too safe to Audenarde. Then we followed the road due east, along which the beaten Hun had retired only a short while ago. All the way we met little parties of returning civilian prisoners making their way home on foot. Generally half a dozen would be harnessed to a small handcart loaded with all their worldly possessions, always surmounted by their national flag. Some indeed had the flags of all the Allies fixed all around the carts and waving proudly in the breeze. On the fields on either side, the peasants were busy ploughing, others were working their cumbersome wagons and three-wheeled carts, but all had cows harnessed with bridle and collar, for the Bosche had taken all the horses.

It was dark when we reached Sotteghem, where our guide took a wrong turning, and lost his way. By the advice of a countryman, he tried to regain his road, and eventually landed us half way down a hill in a narrow road with a broken bridge at the bottom. Here we off-loaded, and finding it impossible to move our baggage lorries forward or backwards, we left a guard and com-

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pleted our journey on foot. Arriving in the village we found all in darkness, and of course no billets arranged. No one there could speak English, and we knew no Flemish, so the difficulty of arranging billets for four hundred men can be imagined.

For four long years Audenhove had been occupied by the Bosche, and tales of his atrocities, his system of fines and imprisonments abounded. His last days there told eloquently of the downfall of the once proud German army. In the words of the Padre, " They went out like beggars, without food or boots or proper clothing, begging their way from door to door."

We remained here for about six weeks, working daily on the standard gauge line, making good the damage done by the Bosche only a day or so before he signed the armistice. After all our racing about, one would have thought a quiet rest would have been appreciated. But it was just the reverse. With the cessation of hostilities and the absence of danger, all the interest seemed to have gone out of our work, and it became merely a dull, monotonous task.

To brighten our lives, football matches were played every possible day, while Lieut. Smith and his concert party treated us all to several very enjoyable concerts on Xmas day and the following days.

My hopes of taking my Company back to England and breaking up there were doomed to disappointment. Individual demobilisation has been ordered, and the company will be gradually shrinking smaller and smaller as the well known faces leave us. Therefore with the wish that we shall some day meet together again, I bring my diary to close with the end of the year.

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The Officers in 1918.

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CHAPTER XI.

Finis.

Looking back over the history of the company, I have often wondered what it was that kept us together so well during our trying experiences. I think there were several reasons, amongst them being the great harmony that existed between all ranks; the spirits of the men themselves and their anxiety always to do their utmost; their keenness for sport of any kind, particularly football and cricket; the excellent entertainments that the concert party provided; and last, but by no means least, the great sense of humour that they all posssesed under all circumstances.

The greatest result of this harmony was the almost complete absence of crime in the company. For weeks at a time the offence report would be nil, and yet the discipline was good; not perhaps the parade ground discipline of a crack line regiment, but discipline that ensured that no man detailed for a job ever left it, even under the most trying circumstances, before completion. This was exemplified by Corporal Riding's report, after carrying out the work that gained him a D.C.M. and his party a M.M. each, "Two breaks repaired, five new lengths put in."

The spirit of the men I shall always remember. That great sentence again and again proved to be true, 'The men were splendid." Two cases flash to my mind. Pte. Fernley who helped to bandage eleven others before reporting himself wounded, and Pte. Murphy who dangerously wounded, asked his rescuer to go back to the others of his section who, he said needed help more than he. "Greater love hath no man than this."

Of their work, I leave others to judge; their opinions are included in a few letters printed at the end of this chapter. From unskilled labour the men by their zeal and energy so perfected themselves that they were recognised as skilled railway troops. They took such an interest in their work and had such "esprit de corps," that they would not, for the honour of their company, turn out a badly finished job. To them I owe, and I gladly acknowledge it here, the honours that have been awarded me as O.C. Company.

Football was undoubtedly the chief sport. Cricket was rendered difficult owing to the absence of turf, and the out field being always full of shell-holes. In the earlier days our star was poor Sergeant Ellis, whose bowling won many a match; later we discovered an excellent substitute in Pte. P. Mann. Of the batsmen, Pte. H. Taylor was the most consistent, while Pte. A. E. Davies, once set, could use the long handle well. The last named was an excellent wicket-keeper, and stood up to the fastest bowling without gloves or pads, until we were able to procure a set. I am afraid no record was kept of the doings of the team.

The soccer team had an excellent record. Playing 38 company matches, they won 28, lost 2 and drew 8, with a goal record of 174 for, and 13 against. In addition, numerous inter-platoon and section matches were arranged,

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and any promising talent noted. It was a great pity the tournament of 1918 was not finished; we had, I think, practically booked those medals for our own. They would have proved a most interesting souvenir, for our team was a well balanced one, and good all round. The enthusiasts who followed every match with such great interest will not easily forget Sergeant Ward, with his fast sprints down the right wing and clever centres. Jack Tonge, with his terrific shots, Rashman at centre with his clever footwork and passing. Adam Robinson inside left, with his back-heeling and wonderful heading (how many goals did he head through from corner-kicks?) Then, last and least in stature, "Tiny" Whitehead, that great little player, who in a memorable match against the Coldstream Guards, surprised their right back by running between his legs and scoring. At centre-half, Sinclair was great with his trapping and placing, while the wing-halves, Corporal W. Jones and Leighton were fast and untiring. Dodson of the "Balloon Section," our right back, was a player of the robust type, and with his partner, Harry Cooper, that phenomenal kicker, formed a strong line of defence. The goal average is sufficient testimony to Pte. A. E. Davies "keeping." He was equally good either between the sticks or behind them at cricket. He had one advantage, he was never disturbed by the comments of the crowd!!! In the early days of the team we lost two excellent players. Tom Bilsborough, our first centre forward, being drowned, and A. F. Morton killed in action. Later on, W. Knight was sent to "Blighty" with shell shock, and Corporal Jones and "Tiny" soon followed him. Morley, who had played many excellent games, became a permanency at half, and the other places were filled by T. Greenwood, Buckley, Alexander and Jennings.

If we were well catered for with sport in the day time, our evening amusements were even better. Our concert party was one of the most prominent features of the company. Lieut. Smith was indefatigible in his efforts to make it a success, and did not rest until he had, by the generosity of a friend at home, provided every member with a pierrot costume. Our three winters spent in the forward and devastated areas would have been intolerable had we not their excellent performances to look forward to. First and foremost were those two excellent comedians, Silaborn and Rooney, with their original inimitable sketches. They kept their audiences in roars of laughter night after night, and were the life and soul of the party. Few of us will ever forget the former as the terrified nigger in the "Black and White" or "Haunted House" sketch, or his impersonation of "Old Bill," in the farce of that name. Rooney was an excellent fellow conspirator and played up to his partner well. We were never tired of seeing the above sketches or the "Mock Drama," for they were always different, and we never knew what new gags would be sprung on us.

Rooney also excelled in patter songs, while Silaborn as the lady whose "Husband left her again," was really great. Corporal Hadley was a very fine baritone, whose songs were always highly appreciated. His best song, "Sleep, Comrades, Sleep," never failed to gain an encore. Together with Private Norman, our leading tenor, they rendered some very fine duets. These did not by any means exhaust our talent, Sergeant Fallon with his commanding presence made a great hit with "Reckless Reggie" and similar

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songs. Pte. Jack Tonge sang ballads of his native Scotland, to the great delight of his compatriots, and Sergeant Sheridan was a great favourite with his light comedy. But the cleverest impersonator of all was Sergeant Vernon as our leading lady. Tall, slight and graceful, he made an ideal girl. How the audience used to roar with laughter when he used to single out some officer in the front row, and sing to him, "I love to linger near a pretty boy like you," using his eyes, (and "He had such beautiful eyes") with great effect. He was so realistic that an ardent French soldier in the crowd fell violently in love with him at first sight, and having been promised an introduction by the Sergeant Major, haunted the stage door for nights.

I have before mentioned the great debt we really owed our accompanist and musical director, Pte. Cooper. Playing to practically the same audience for week after week, there was always a huge amount of practicing to be done, and many new songs to be learned. But he never seemed to tire and would go on playing accompaniments for hour after hour. Without his aid, I am sure the party would never have been the great success it was.

All this sport and amusement helped us all to forget for a while the monotony and danger of our lives, and in this we were helped by the wonderful sense of humour possessed by the men themselves. No situation was ever too serious to be made the subject fo a joke, and many and varied were the yarns told of one another round the braziers from time to time.

In the early days, Davies, the "King of the Dixies," made a stand for his camp kettle of four dud shells and proceeded to light his fire between ! ! ! Luckily he was discovered in time or he would have been demobilised long ago! Corporal McGowan lit his fire in a Lewis gun pit. For a time all went well, but he had failed to notice in the mud underneath a drum of ammunition. Of course the heat started it going, McGowan, the dixie and the fire all disappeared and his section had no tea that day.

Then there was "Bob," who, carrying a sand bag in readiness, stopped a petrol engine and asked the driver in the broadest Lancashire, "Ay, lad, tha met gie us a bit o' coal."

A few days later he had his dinner blown away by a shell, and having only dry bread left, he called at a control on the line and asked the sapper in charge, "Has't ta gotten a onion, mate?" The R.E., puzzled for a while, asked him to repeat his question, and then disappeared into his cabin and brought out a copy of "London Opinion."

Another well known character was Jimmie Barlow. James went home on "leaf," and on being asked if he would have something to eat, answered promptly, "Oui, mother" adding "that's French you know." His admiring parent asked if he knew any more; James replied airily, "Oh, lots." "Well let's hear it," said his mother, and James obliged with all the French he knew, "Oui, oui."

But the wit of the party was "Zebra," who was never at a loss for a reply. Zeb went down to the base to a rest camp, and being a vegetarian, lit a fire and commenced frying some potatoes. An irate Sergeant Major promptly espied him and demanded, "Do you think you've come here for a course of cooking." With the soft answer that turneth away wrath, Zeb replied, "No; for a course of crown and anchor." On another occasion, when asked by an

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inquisitive N.C.O. if he belonged to a Labour mob, he replied "No; to an aerial enjoyment company." Meeting a man racing from the Brickspur, Zeb stopped him and asked "Wher't ta running, mate?" The runner replied, "Only from those shells." "What's tha name, lad?" was the next question. The man gave it, and asked, "What do you want to know for?" "Oh," said Zeb, "thout tha wer Postle training."

That brickspur at Boesinghe was a death trap, if anyone lingered there when once the Bosche started shelling, and nearly every man in the company had had to bolt out for his life at one time or another. This race became a standard joke amongst the company, and was even introduced into one of our comedians' sketches. "Can you run?" asked Rooney, and Silaborn's reply, "Run! you should see me sprint from the brick spur," elicited roars of laughter from the very men who were everyday competing in that race with death as their opponent!!!

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APPENDIX.

Extract from letter from COLONEL J. D. R. STEWART, *Commanding 67th Labour Group.*

14th September, 1917.

"A. D. L. V. writes: I am glad to hear that 58th Labour Company possesses sufficient experience and knowledge to be treated as a skilled unit."

Extract from letter from DIRECTOR OF LIGHT RAILWAYS.

"The magnificent work done by the following officers of your Company while working with Light Railways has been brought to notice:

CAPTAIN T. CHARLES THOMAS.

2ND LIEUT. JAMES F. WORRALL.

I wish to express to you personally my appreciation of the valuable help rendered by your Company to Light Railways as a whole."

(Signed) J. H. WARREN,
Brig. General,
D. L. R.

G.H.Q.,
October 7th, 1917.

Extract from letter from LIEUT. COLONEL J. K. CORNWALL, *Commanding 8th Battalion Canadian Railway Troops.*

"I am enclosing for your information copy of letter from Major Barber, D.S.O., Chief Engineer, in which special mention is made of the workmanship of the 58th Labour Company.

This Company has specialised in grading and is a particularly well-balanced Company for this class of work. They are fortunate in being commanded by an officer who has taken great pains and pride in bringing his Company up to this high state of efficiency, and he certainly must have had the hearty and whole-souled co-operation of his officers, N.C.O.'s and men. The work of this Company has been a good object lesson to the 8th Battalion, C.R.T. While we may excel in all round railroad work we do not mind admitting that the grading performance of the 58th Labour Company beats anything we have been able to do in this Battalion in the grading line.

The L. 6 line was constructed for the French, and was completed seven days under the time limit, which is the cleanest, fastest and most complete operation of its kind that has been done in this part of France, and your Company is entitled to its full proportion of credit.

(Signed) J. K. CORNWALL, *Lieut. Col.*,
Commanding 8th Battalion C.R.T.

19th May, 1918.

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Extract from latter from R. C. E. 2.

"The Army Commander, after his recent visit round the works has commanded me to convey to all ranks his appreciation of the good work carried out by the Transportation Troops of this area in the rapid reconstruction of the railways destroyed by the enemy in his retirement.

Please transmit this appreciation to all ranks under your command on parade."

(Signed) K. Lomas, *Lieut.-Colonel, R.E.,*
6th November, 1918. *R.C.E. II.*

Extract from letter from L. R. C. E. 2.

"For many months the 58th Labour Company has been under my direct supervision and they have invariably done the tasks allotted to them with such speed, intelligence and scientific finish that I place them amongst the very best who have been on Light Railways in the Second Army.

Captain Thomas is well qualified to take over any railway work and he has trained his officers, N.C.O.'s and men in such a manner that they have become highly skilled railway troops."
28*th October,* 1918.

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